

08 JAN 2014

WHY IS MODERN PENTATHLON AMAZING? (BLOG BY SHAUNE BIDDULPH)



I am absolutely blown away by the positive response the last blog I wrote got in the international Modern Pentathlon community! It was intended to be a playful way to explain the magic of our sport to my non-pent friends. In order to do the topic justice, though, I feel I should write a real blog explaining why I truly love this sport.

I think one thing we all know as pentathletes is that one of the most special things about our sport is that we get to be a part of so many different sports' cultures. Most swimmers don't develop the camaraderie runners have, or understand the magic of those hot, perfect days where you leave it all on the track then, in an exhausted puddle of yourself in the grass, you stretch and do core with a group of people who can empathize with the pain you just endured more purely than any you will find in any other facet of life. Most runners don't know what it's like to communicate and bond with a 1200lb animal you just met, convincing it that it wants to put its heart into carrying you around a difficult course of jumps. They don't know the incredible feeling that comes with jumping a big

over perfectly, or knowing that an animal is choosing to give everything for you, or save your butt when you completely miss to a jump. Fencers don't understand the lactic acid, the pain and pride that comes with 50km weeks in the pool or with completing an insanely high mileage practice, noodly arms hardly able to pull them out of the pool. And most riders don't know what it's like to push their own bodies the way they train and develop their horses' bodies.

Along with that participation in all the other sport cultures is a unique empathy and respect for our peers' unique talents, limitations, and abilities. I love to watch my track friends compete, watching them feel and run through the pain of lactic and fatigue that I've experienced so many times alongside them. The same goes for swim friends, and fencing friends. I know what it feels like to go into a fencing tournament and be just half a second off all day long. I know the frustration of missing a distance in show jumping and losing a class because of it, or falling off because of an embarrassing spook I wasn't expecting. I admire my fellow pentathletes who come from swimming and can do things in the pool I can hardly fathom, and empathize with them as they learn to ride or fence, enduring the same frustrations and setbacks I experience in the pool. There was an ad for milk a few years ago that said: "Nobody is good at everything, but everybody is good at something!", and I think that's such an accurate descriptor for pentathlon. We all come from different backgrounds, from different areas of sport, from different cultures and time zones, but we can all empathize with and understand one another because we know the frustration of learning a new sport as an adult. Though each of us may be better than another athlete in one of the sports, it's very likely that the same athlete is better than each of us in another of the disciplines. I think it creates a worldview for us outside of sport that is different from that created by anything else. We all know what it's like to win, and we all know what it's like to lose. And, I think perhaps most importantly, we all understand that winning in one event does not guarantee success overall—much the same as how victories are in life.

I came to the sport as a 24 year old from riding. I completed my first national, then international meets as a 25 year old. I'm as non-traditional as they come in the pentathlon community. I was an absolute nobody, and an athlete that no one had any real reason to be excited about because, let's be honest, people don't learn to swim the 200m freestyle fast at 25. That was when I first realized the empathy, the generosity, and the magic that is the Modern Pentathlon, community, though. Let me back up for a second. When I was first learning to fence, I asked my training partner Josh Riker-Fox which female pentathlete was the best in the world. He told me I should look up videos of triple World Champion Amelie Caze, as she is a true pentathlete with no real weaknesses. I should watch her fence and aspire to be like her. I did, of course. Then, in one of those incredible twists of fate that you can never really explain, Amelie came to Calgary to visit for two weeks. She is as big a deal as they come in the sport. But she is also one of the most kind, wonderful, down to earth women I know.

I don't know where else in sport you get the opportunity to meet your idol, much less to become close friends with them. Amelie invited me to Paris to stay and train and compete with her and the French team. Her family welcomed me with open arms, and everyone I met shared, without reservation, everything they could think of that would help me become the best pentathlete I could be. Amelie spent hours with me in the pool, giving me individual direction and help and patiently explaining why the many technical flaws my stroke exhibited were holding me back. I don't know anyone in any other sport who had a three time Olympian, three time World Champion (and I don't even know how many dozens of international competitions she's won) take two weeks out of their own life and dedicate them entirely to helping a nobody. I could go on forever describing why Amelie is an amazing person, but I want to make sure that one point is clear: They say that you don't choose Modern Pentathlon, but that pentathlon chooses you. I think Pent 'chooses' then develops the most incredible athletes and people, and that Amelie is truly the most perfect example of a pentathlete. A true all around sportswoman, with incredible talent but also an

unexplainably wonderful heart for helping and learning from others.

It's not just the athletes who are special, though. When I competed in the Pan Am Championships in the Dominican Republic in August, Juan Manzo (the Mexican President of NORCECA), greeted me by name, shook my hand and gave me a hug when I saw him. Then he found me and gave me a congratulatory high five after the combined event. Again, in no other sport have I ever known officials at the highest level who took the time to personally get to know the athletes, especially the nobodies like me who are just beginning in the sport. There are so many people from so many different NOC's who have been so incredible, so generous, and so full of respect for each of us; it's amazing.

Our sport is so global! At the last Olympics, the medalists were from six different countries (Czech Republic, China, and Hungary in the men's competition, and Lithuania, Great Britain, and Brazil in the women's). How many other sports are so globally successful that the level is equally strong in such a huge variety of countries? I have friends from so many different time zones, friends who come from such a wide variety of sport backgrounds, friends who speak so many different languages (though most speak English with me because unfortunately I'm functionally unilingual).

Finally, I believe Modern Pentathletes truly are the best all around athletes. And some of the athletes with the best bodies (runners' legs/abs, fencers' glutes, riders' adductors/lower abs, swimmers' arms/shoulders/back)! We have to become strong in both technical sports and endurance/power sports, a balance that is incredibly difficult to achieve in developing the best training program. We compete in difficult distances in the swim/run (because they're shorter, they require much more talent and are less dependent on pure aerobic strength), and can intimately relate to athletes in so many different sports! We know what it's like to be a biathlete, trying to shoot accurately at a high heart rate, we know the pain involved in becoming a strong runner/swimmer, the frustrations and ebbs and flows that come with learning to fence and ride well, and we understand how much work goes into becoming a top level precision shooter (it's a lot harder than it looks!). We often spend so much time trying to defend our sport that I think we sometimes miss the magic that it truly is.