
Golden Glories, Broken Hearts & Smashed Records

I'm sipping a smoothie as I sit opposite a sporting superstar in the unassuming setting of Frenz Café at the AUT Millennium Institute. I can't help but think it's perhaps an incongruous spot in which to interview an Olympian, multiple world and Commonwealth champion and reigning World Athlete of the Year. But, once you get chatting to Valerie Adams, you soon realise that she too, is just as unassuming. A young girl sits next to the athlete and asks for a selfie. Adams obliges, asking about her school, her family and her friends. The young girl, with almost comedic stubbornness, remains seated at the athlete's side as we continue the chat but Valerie is all warmth, smiles and patience. A couple of hints are dropped, but the girl is too young – and in awe – to take them. Ten minutes later she leaves on her own terms.

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces



"You know, I'm just Val," Adams tells me. "What you see is what you get. People think I live this extraordinary life, but it's pretty normal. I get up early, eat breakfast in my apartment and then train all day. I come home shattered. I shower, eat, sleep then do it all over again." Her upbringing, she says, installed strong values: "We didn't have much. We lived off forty bucks a week. We had to have powdered milk. I've worked hard for what I have. I know money can change people, but I never let it get the better of me."

And so from powdered milk to breakfast with royalty, last New Year's Day saw Adams received by Tongan rulers King Tupou VI and Queen Nanasipauu, an invitation of the highest honour. Whilst on the island, Valerie was also anointed a chief of the village in which her mother was born. The athlete became the first woman ever to be given such a title. It was, she admits, among her proudest achievements. But then, Adams is used to breaking records.

It has now been four years since Valerie was last beaten in competition; fifty-six meetings in total. It's a staggering run, especially given the finely-margined world of modern-day sport. No other shot putter in history has achieved such a feat. It is one which helped secure Valerie, World Athlete of the Year at the end of 2014. She is the first female thrower to take that gong too. "I was so overwhelmed by that," says Adams. "It was great on a personal level, but also to receive it on behalf of the throwers because track events usually dominate. It felt as though we were breaking new ground." The accolade came on the back of a very tough year. Her body, beginning to show signs of the daily physical toll, was operated on a number of times. "I really had to grit my teeth to maintain focus and get through that period," she says. "I was so pleased to finish the year unbeaten as it was the most excruciating of my career. I do have a high pain threshold, but it was a case of mind over matter."

How do you develop that mental toughness?

"For me, it was through life experience. I lost my mom when I was 15 and I had to look after myself. There was foster care. I lived on the streets. I married young [to discuss thrower Bertrand Vili], divorced young! I was really tall from an early age and was bullied and name-called and all the rest of it. Kids can be mean. Of course it hurt and for a long time it affected me. But sport gave me my chance to shine. Sport gives you that self-confidence to be yourself and it gave me the determination to be the best athlete in the world." It's a determination that, admits Valerie, verges on stubbornness: "I should have taken some time out last year, but it's not in my nature. I'm probably paying for it a bit now."

Valerie references her childhood a lot. She's proud of her Kiwi upbringing and Tongan heritage. Her mother was a massive influence and Valerie, thankful for small mercies, feels blessed to have been able to hold her mum in her arms as she passed. Valerie says her dad "wasn't much of a father, but at least he passed on some great sporting genes [three of her brothers have represented the New Zealand national basketball team and her younger brother, Steven, is carving a successful career in the NBA]." After her mother died, Valerie decided to get to know her father: "And for seven years, we had the most amazing relationship. The night he died I was the last to arrive at the hospital. He held on until I got there. It was magical in a way. I'm lucky to have been able to be there for both my mum and dad at the end."

You name your coach Jean-Pierre Egger as a father-figure. Do you think that was something you were subconsciously searching for?

"Well, I do believe that people come into our lives at certain times for a reason. JP came into my life following two divorces – my husband and my former coach – and JP's now more than a coach, I love him like a father and the same goes for his wife. They're my parents in Switzerland [where Valerie spends much of the year training]. He has won so many medals as an athlete and a coach of so many disciplines, but he's so humble. He wanted to help me to be the athlete I could be."

Their relationship began with some rather blunt advice. "I was 20 kilos heavier when we first met up," says Valerie, "and he told me I needed to lose it. I could have taken that in a negative way, but I didn't. I lost the weight in three months to show him how serious I was and six months later I won the World Championship with a personal best, breaking the competition record which had stood since 1987. JP changed me from being a powerful thrower into a more dynamic athlete and that is what has enabled me to last so long. If it weren't for him, I think I would have been retired by now, simply because of the stress on my body."

The past year, another man has entered the athlete's life. She visibly glows when discussing her new beau, Gabe. "Life's really good at the moment," Valerie says. "I'm training hard and have a good man. He's cool, nothing fazes him. He came over to Glasgow for the Commonwealth Games. I actually went to church and school with him when I was younger. We'll be going to the Halbergs together, which will be our first public event as a couple."

Valerie is no stranger to victory at the Halberg Awards, either. Of all the accolades, taking gold at Beijing, she says, is her most precious professional memory. She won gold again four years later of course, at the London Olympics, but it was a victory that will be forever tinged with sadness. Believing she had lost to Belarusian Nadzeya Ostapchuk, Valerie headed back to Switzerland with her silver medal in tow. A few days later, the phone rang. Ostapchuk had failed a drugs test and Adams was awarded gold. "I was driving to JP's house when the call came," says Valerie. "I pulled over and all I could do was cry. It was one of those real hyperventilating cries too, real ugly, so I was glad to be on my own! I was hurt, I was overwhelmed. I rang my family, rang Nick [Cowan, her manager], then carried on driving to my coach's house. We had that moment, there, that we should have had in London. That moment that was stolen from me."

New Zealand did all it could to make up for Valerie's stolen moment. A massive medal ceremony was held at the Cloud. The nation partied as fireworks erupted simultaneously over the skies of Wellington and Auckland. Thousands turned up to see the Olympic medal hung around Valerie's neck as millions more watched the live televised event from their homes. "It was bittersweet," admits the athlete. "It was awesome to get the medal and the positive thing was that I was able to share it with the whole country, to sing the national anthem with them."

In another year, it's another Olympics and Valerie is raring to go for Rio. "Let's see if we can do the triple," she says. "The challenge is there, and I'm certainly up for it. Physically, I will make sure I'm in the best shape possible." I ask her about any pre-tournament rituals or superstitions, but she doesn't go there, though she knows plenty that do: "Imagine the freak-out if you were to lose that lucky bracelet or whatever! No, so long as I've got my throwing shoes, my chalk, my belt and a few bananas in my bag, I'm good to go."

She gets given so much free stuff from sponsors, Valerie says, she gives most of it to kids and struggling athletes. When not at work, she helps train others as often as she can. Not concerned with finding the next Valerie Adams ("though it would be great if I did!"), the athlete gets a kick from simply inspiring others to live healthier, happier lives. Sunday is her day though. Hers and Gabe's. It begins with a trip to their local church. Valerie is a member of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Religion played a big part in her upbringing, but following her mother's death, she drifted away from it. "The last eighteen months I've come back more to the place where I was brought up," she says. "As you get older, you have that better understanding of how it all works. You're in that place where you have freedom of choice. To do things because you want to, not because you have to."

And off she goes, with bananas in her bag and the weight of a nation's expectations upon her shoulders.