

No limits: Olympic athletes thriving with hearing loss

Contributed by [Lisa Packer](#), staff writer, *Healthy Hearing* | Thursday, August 4th, 2016

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Full of drive and determination, Olympic athletes and Olympic hopefuls are admired role models who remind us of the amazing human potential. All eyes will be on our heroes in Rio de Janeiro this month as they strive for the pinnacle of athletic success: a gold medal. Being an elite athlete is no easy feat. Athletes regularly contend with injuries, grueling hours of training and sacrifices too numerous to mention, and some are competing with another challenge: hearing loss.

In spite of their hearing loss, or perhaps because of it, these athletes have ascended to great heights in their individual sports. One thing is certain: their different approaches to hearing loss have informed their choices as competitors and helped them get where they are today.

Dedication and advocacy

Some athletes, like [Marcus Titus](#) for example, are born advocates for others. On the surface, Titus is your typical Olympic hopeful. He has preternatural discipline and dedication to training, spending hours in the pool long past the point where others would have packed up and gone home. But there is one difference between Titus and his fellow swimmers: he has been deaf since birth. Even after his diagnosis at age 3, his parents were determined to raise him with the same opportunities as a hearing child. It was his mother who encouraged him to join the swim team his freshman year of high school, and once he started competing, he was hooked.



Rather than viewing his deafness as a disadvantage, Titus says it gives him an edge by allowing him to focus on the race instead of the noise of the crowd and other swimmers.

Titus remained determined to swim competitively even when presented with challenges such as not being able to hear the buzzer that starts the race. He realized that just relying on the visual cue of seeing the other swimmers dive off of the blocks would not be enough, as even that split-second delay would put him at a disadvantage. Instead he requested that strobe lights be installed under the blocks. And as a college swimmer at The University of Arizona, a sign language interpreter was on the pool deck.

But that's not all. When [USA Swimming](#) decided not to use hand signals to start races in the Olympic trials in 2012, Titus reminded officials of the rule that allows referees to use hand signals or strobe lights to signal the start of the race in the event that there is a competitor with hearing loss. He started a Facebook page to encourage other deaf swimmers to contact USA Swimming officials, and he emerged victorious. His selflessness

and advocacy extends beyond the pool, though. Titus created a website to collect donations to fund his life as a swimmer and plans to donate any extra proceeds to USA Deaf Swimming to help other deaf swimmers achieve their dreams.

Titus trained in earnest for the 2016 Olympics in Rio, but unfortunately, his sixth place finish at the trials wasn't enough to get him there. However, one place you'll be sure to see him is at the 2017 [Deaflympics](#) because he is not ready to hang up his swimsuit just yet.

"To me, being deaf is not a disability," [Titus said](#). "It's just hearing loss. Anyone can do it, if they have the passion to keep on training. It's just discipline, really. And I've had amazing coaches, amazing support, to help me keep on swimming."

Pushing the limits

One really has to dig to even find a mention of volleyball player [David Smith's](#) hearing loss among his impressive record. From his NCAA Division I championship team at UC Irvine to playing on the U.S. Junior National team then the U.S. National team, and playing on professional teams from France to Spain to Puerto Rico, it is immediately clear that Smith is one of the top men's volleyball players in the world. His hearing loss, however, is largely a footnote.

To be fair, with a career as impressive as Smith's, the focus remains entirely on the sport. Smith, 31, was born with severe hearing loss in both ears and has worn hearing aids all of his life. The hearing aids often don't help during matches, however, because sweat tends to make his hearing aids malfunction. The fact that the 6'7" middle blocker relies on hand signals and lip reading during matches certainly hasn't held him back.

"To his credit, there hasn't been a lot of adjustment," says USA head volleyball coach [Alan Knipe](#). "He's very much overcome his hearing loss, and he very much wants to be another guy on the team. So he goes out of his way to make sure it doesn't hinder the team in any way."

Smith was a member of the 2012 Olympic team, and will make a return to the [Olympics at the 2016 games](#) in Rio this month. It has been an incredible journey for him, and he acknowledges that even for him it is somewhat surprising.

"If someone were to go back and tell the 14-year-old me that volleyball was going to take me to college, around the world, to the Olympics and beyond, I am pretty sure I would not have believed them," Smith says. "This sport that started out as just something fun to do has been a blessing far beyond what I could have ever hoped for."

Sacrificing for the sport

We already know that Olympians are cut from a different cloth than the rest of us, and that with Olympic dreams come great sacrifices. But one Olympian in particular might just be sacrificing his hearing in order to compete in the Rio games.

When champion British long jumper [Greg Rutherford](#) suffered a minor neck injury during a Diamond League meeting in Rome in early June, he didn't think much of it. The following week, however, competing back at home in Birmingham, the whiplash he received upon landing his second jump left him unable to move his head and neck.

Though his neck healed, Rutherford was left with an unfortunate and rare secondary effect: severe inner ear damage. He was officially diagnosed with a condition called cochlear hydrops, which is an atypical form of [Meniere's disease](#) that causes a feeling of fullness in the ear and a roaring or rushing sound. "I knew I shouldn't have jumped in Birmingham because my neck felt really stiff," [Rutherford said](#). "If the room falls silent for a moment all I hear is loud white noise so it's been a struggle to sleep. I've gone from hearing in stereo to mono."

Though there is a 25 percent chance that he will never fully regain the hearing in his left ear, and that further jumps could exacerbate the condition and cause him to lose his hearing permanently, he will push on to Rio in order to defend his gold medals. In addition to being an Olympic champion, Rutherford currently holds three other major international long jump titles: The World Championships, Commonwealth and European.

"I don't think there are many jumpers who can say they have jumped so hard that they have lost their hearing so I've broken new ground there," [said Rutherford](#).

If we can take one lesson from these amazing athletes, it is to not let hearing loss or any other obstacle, stand in the way of achieving your dreams. A professional hearing evaluation and the right treatment can help you live up to your fullest potential, too! If you have hearing loss, see a [hearing care professional](#) such as one of our consumer reviewed clinics near you for help.

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