

PROFILE: MARY ELLEN CLARK by Lisa Oram

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A Different Kind of Platform

Olympic diver Mary Ellen Clark lives her encore

For two days this month, Mary Ellen Clark will quietly celebrate her memories of participating in the 1996 and 1992 Olympics. Both times, competing in 10-meter platform diving, her events fell on July 26 and 27. Now, she says, those days draw her into personal reflection on what it has meant to be a two-time Olympic medalist, and more importantly, where her life is headed.

"In every athlete's life, there gets to be a point when you say to yourself, 'What's my encore?'"

Clark, 43, lives in Amherst, a move she made from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 2004 with her partner, Amy Straut. Clark says it wasn't easy to leave the "home of her Olympic experience" where she'd spent 15 years, but she was committed to supporting Straut's pursuit of a second career in veterinary medicine at her alma mater, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Clark talks about herself and her Olympic story like someone who is used to it—and who enjoys it. Yet the memories still move her. Tears pool in her eyes when she describes how she started diving when she was seven years old, and how at 29, "an older athlete," she accepted a bronze medal for the United States women's diving team at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona.

"I was nobody at those games," she recalls. "I was not expected to medal. And when it was over everyone said, 'You medaled. You fulfilled a dream. You're going to retire now. You're done, right?' And I thought to myself: 'I am so not done. I have just arrived.'"

Clark went on to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta and landed her second bronze medal. At 32 years old, and following an illness that threat-

ened to end her career, she became the oldest women's diving medalist in the history of the Olympic Games. Her final dive was preceded by a two-minute standing ovation from the crowd.

This, too, was a beginning rather than an end. "I feel like I was given a platform—no pun intended—to do other things on a global stage," she explains. Clark began traveling the world as a motivational speaker, which she loves, and continues still, addressing groups in business and at schools, on cruises and at conferences. She also built up a personal training business in Fort Lauderdale, which she's now restarted in Western Massachusetts. She often works with multiple members of families who seek an active and fit lifestyle—families like the one she was raised in.

"I'm grateful for how I grew up," Clark says about her childhood in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. Athletics was the family way; her father had been a diver and her mother, a cheerleader. Clark attributes her athletic confidence to the family's strong support of each of their seven children—four boys and three girls—and the "yes, you can" attitude they instilled in her. When Clark was in third grade, *Reader's Digest* dubbed her family "the Diving Clarks." Four of the seven siblings, including Clark, were competing in the U.S. National Diving Championship that year. In high school, Clark continued to dive and also played field hockey and lacrosse.

As a senior at Penn State, Clark took a leap—so to speak—from springboard to platform diving. The switch changed her career and ultimately led her to the Olympics.

"I had no intention of doing platform," she says emphatically. Each year, the coach asked her to give it a try and she declined: "no interest, too high, scary."

Finally, in the summer before her senior year, a bunch of teammates were trying platform, and she climbed the ladder 33 feet in the air. As she talks about it, Clark imitates her younger self walking out to the edge and walking back. Walking out again, and walking back. She says it might have taken 45 minutes to finally get up her nerve, and when she did, she stood at the end of the concrete platform and performed a front one-and-a-half somersault dive.

"It takes two seconds to hit the water, and you are traveling at 35 miles an hour," Clark explains. "It's not a sport for everybody." Over time, she says, her fear was transformed into



Mary Ellen Clark diving in Barcelona, Spain

Photo courtesy of Sports Illustrated

respect—respect for the sport and what it requires of you.

"Little by little, I learned a list of eight dives and got myself into a qualifying meet for Nationals. And then I almost made Nationals," says Clark, still almost not believing how fast she began to succeed in something she had just tried.

In 1988, Clark qualified for the Olympic trials but didn't make the team. Fueled by the near miss, she moved to Florida and began training full time with eight-time Olympic coach Ron O'Brien, "the best coach in the world," according to Clark.

"There are some people who are just naturally talented for a sport," she says. "I was scrapper...but I got the job done, sometimes by sheer determination. I worked hard. I was that person who just never gave up."

Clark remembers the two years following the 1992 Olympics as probably the best in her diving career. Between continuing to train for the next Olympics and riding the fame of the previous one, she was having the time of her life. Then, in 1995, she got what she calls a "blessing in disguise, a great reality check"—the sudden onset of vertigo that lasted for nine months during which she couldn't dive at all.

"It made me realize that diving was going to end, and I had to ask myself how I was going to deal with it." After months of frustration and searching, the vertigo was finally treated with cranio-sacral therapy, and she returned to diving. She finished her career in Atlanta as she had hoped. Her father, who was her

first coach and with whom she was very close, was not able to attend the Barcelona games due to health problems—but he was right there in Atlanta. He died a year later.

Clark is a big believer in overcoming obstacles to reach "a person's pure potential." She's also a big believer in dreams. On her refrigerator at home, a magnet reads, "Dreams come a size too large so we can grow into them."

Much of her life now is dedicated to helping others grow into their dreams. In addition to her motivational speaking and personal training, she coaches diving at Mount Holyoke College and Amherst Regional High School (where she also coaches girls' lacrosse).

Meredith Bartelstein, a diver at Mount Holyoke, says she was thrilled to learn the Clark would be her coach. "When I came to Mount Holyoke, I knew the diving coach was leaving. I knew they'd have somebody for me, but I didn't know who it would be." Diving is a small world, Bartelstein adds, and when she tells people that Clark is her coach, it's a big deal.

Bartelstein, who has been competing off and on since she was nine years old, feels that Clark has helped her be a more consistent, confident diver. All dives, Bartelstein explains, boil down to a few basic things. No matter how good you are, those basic things are always hard.

"I haven't added to my list of dives, but I'm more comfortable standing up in a meet," she says about her training with Clark.

"My dives are more polished."

Clark has been a key source of support, says Bartelstein. "During the first year, I won a lot. But this year, we had another diver who was excellent. After a meet, Mary Ellen always acknowledged that I did well, even when I didn't win." After Clark and the other diver returned from the National Championships, Clark sent a card to Bartelstein saying that she, too, could reach the national level.

"My mom said the same thing," adds Bartelstein. "But it's completely different coming from Mary Ellen. I know she wouldn't say it if she didn't mean it."

Clark says one of her most important jobs, especially when working with young people, is to help them remember why they're doing their sport. It has to be fun, she says. When Clark was growing up, the adults around her often checked in to ask, "Are you still having fun?" Clark appreciates that perspective. If it's not fun, she says, then you won't find the success you want.

After I met her for this article, Clark invited me to return with my seven-year-old daughter to watch a videotape of her diving. She pulled her medal case, a green velvet box, out of a drawer. My daughter held the heavy bronze discs, and asked Clark, "Are you proud of these?" Clark bent down to her level, looked her straight in the eye and answered, almost in a whisper, "More than anything."

Lisa Oram is a freelance writer.



Photo courtesy of UMass/Amherst
Mary Ellen Clark