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A Multilingual Newspaper from The Multilingual Journalism Program at Lehman College

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Near Miss

A Bronx swimmer was fast enough to compete in Sydney yet lost his chance at Olympic fame because of a bureaucratic snag

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While most of the best athletes in the world were fighting against time to win medals in Australia, Donstan Charles took a couple of weeks off. He stopped waking up at 4:00 in the morning, as he has for over five consecutive years. In the evening, he'd rest on the sofa in his Bronx apartment and watch TV. The only time he budged, it seems, was to fetch snacks – popcorn with extra butter and a can of soda.



Make no mistake - Donstan's no couch potato. He's a swimmer, one good enough to qualify for the Sydney Games. His best time, just under a minute and 12 seconds in the 100 meter breaststroke, would have beaten a number of Olympians such as Joe Atuhaire from Uganda (who finished at 1:22:35), Kieran Chan from Papua New Guinea (1:13:34), or Antonio Leon from Paraguay (1:08:60), all of whom competed in the 2000 games. Instead, Charles's dream of going to the Olympic Games to represent his home country, Dominica, faded away just weeks before the games began. A decision from the Dominica Olympic Committee forced him to stay in New York, gazing at the times of rivals he could have beaten as they were posted in telecasts from Australia. And worse still, Charles knew all the while that Dominica, an island of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean Sea, had no representation for the 100-meter breaststroke.

He's puzzled to say the least. The decision of the Dominica Olympic Committee of not taking him to Sydney could not have been based on the regulations set by FINA, the Federation

Internationale De Natation Amateur, which is the international organization in charge of setting the standard qualifying times, rules and regulations for any Olympic sport performed in a swimming pool. FINA's rules state that in swimming meets, every country has the right to enter one athlete in each event, regardless of their times, and Dominica only sent one swimmer to compete for the 50 meter freestyle, and no one for the 100 meter breaststroke. Unfortunately, the attempts to obtain information from the Dominica Olympic Committee on why Donstan Charles was denied the chance to participate at Sydney have not been successful. Charles certainly followed procedures. Peter Kiernan, his coach of many years from Lehman College, made sure to send all the required entry forms in on time. Charles had set his times in official swimming competitions after May 25th 1999, as required by FINA, and he had constantly informed the committee on his status. All the Dominican committee provided as a reply to inquiries, weeks before the games, was that he had not trained hard enough and that for the next Olympiad, they would consider him as a priority, since he had posted very good qualifying times.

Donstan Charles was born in Dominica, on October 19, 1974. He came to the United States at the age of 15 because his mother had moved to the Bronx, New York, and did not plan to go back to the Caribbean island. He attended Evander Childs High School on Gun Hill Road and started swimming competitively only because there was no other way for him to have access to a pool. "Back then I was one of the slowest swimmers in the team," he chuckles. "I had to swim in the lane with the slowest people, and I looked awful, I would swim with those long, long shorts," he remembers.

Today, Charles is 26 and has graduated from Herbert H. Lehman College with a B.S. in Economics and Accounting and a grade point average of 3.6. At the same time that he was completing a degree, he kept swimming, steadily improving his times in the 100-meter breaststroke, and representing Lehman College in collegiate competitions for four years. All the while, he was building himself a personal record to use as his pass to the Olympic Games. Charles is a serious trainer. Typically, he wakes up at 4:00AM, kisses his wife goodbye, and rushes to the swimming pool to start practice at 5:30. At 7:30, he scurries off to the showers to be ready to go to work on time. He puts in eight hours at B. C. Harris Publishing Company in White Plains where he works as an accountant. Then, at five, he goes back to the gym, and lifts weights. If he has any energy left, he'll swim some more or play water polo. By 9:30PM, he goes back home, to "wifey" as he calls his wife Deborah. Sundays are his only rest from the routine; Charles is sure to spend all of Saturday mornings in the gym as well. "Actually the hardest part of training for me is jumping in the water," he admits. "I usually take about five minutes just staring at the water before I jump in, but once I am in the water, I try to enjoy the entire workout." Ironically, Charles still trains with Selwyn Gibson, a friend he's known since high school who happened to share the slow lane with him at Evander Childs.

According to Freddy Sanchez, a student of Lehman College and one of Charles' swimming comrades, Donstan Charles is a hard working athlete that has potential to improve his times. Sanchez believes that if Charles had more time for swimming he could become one of the top 20 competitors in the world. "Unfortunately he can't give 100% of his time to swimming, he has a wife and an accounting career to take care of," says Sanchez, who holds the 100-meter, and 200-meter backstroke records of Lehman College, and is also trained by Peter Kiernan, the Lehman Lighting coach.

That said, Sanchez will tell you that Charles is probably one of the most dedicated and responsible swimmers of all those who come to train at the Apex. "Even through the hardest times, the idea of quitting never crossed my mind," says Charles who explains how he's kept swimming even when it was difficult.

One thing that keeps Charles motivated is his hope to one day repeat the great experience of representing his country in a big event, as he did in the Pan American Games in Venezuela in August of 1999. Even though he posted one of his worst times (1:14:89, adding over 2 full seconds to his best recorded time of 1:12:81), Charles says he found himself even more inspired than ever before. "It was the greatest thing ever in my swimming career. I was tired. I had been in an airplane for so long and the time difference really got to me. But while I was walking in to the opening ceremony, children came up to us to get autographs. I felt very special and I knew that all those years of hard work were paying off, although not monetarily," the accountant says.