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THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

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Blair Evans - New kid
on the Olympic blocks

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NEW KID | ON THE BLOCKS

STORY: CLAIRE DAVIES | PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD HATHERLY

It's the same routine each morning. The alarm goes off at 4.40am and Blair Evans reluctantly rolls out of bed. As the heater fires up, she grabs one of the 30 pairs of bathers hanging on the back of the door, throws on her Ugg boots, grabs a towel and a muesli bar and heads out into the icy morning air. Winter training is a nightmare, Evans says, but she can't imagine life any other way.

And in just under a week the WA swimming sensation lines up on the Olympic blocks for the race of her life.

The 400m medley swimmer and relay hopeful has her pre-race routine down pat – from the playlist for her iPod, to the words that will run through her mind before she dives into the water. "One of the girls I used to train with told me, 'Before you race, throw your heart off the block and the rest will follow,'" Evans says.

Mind over matter is what the 21-year-old lives by.

"Your mind will always give up before your body," she says. "These words always keep me strong, and keep me moving during training when I actually feel like I'm going to die. I tell myself it hurts up to a certain point, then it doesn't hurt anymore."

At the national championships in March, Evans touched the wall in 4:37.80, four seconds behind race favourite Stephanie Rice, and qualified for her first Olympics.

With similar dark features, Evans bears an uncanny resemblance to Australian swimming's glamour girl, and admits that people often confuse the two of them.

When asked how she and 24-year-old Rice get along, Evans gives a cheeky smile that hints at her highly competitive personality.

"Out of the pool, everyone is mates," she says. "But as soon as you get on the blocks no one is your friend. I look at every single girl swimming the 400m as a threat."

Evans has been swimming since she was six – always trying to beat her big brother, Jason, when they raced. But it wasn't until she was 16 – a "make-or-break age for a swimmer" – that she decided to get serious.

"I was invited to an individual medley camp to train alongside Stephanie Rice and I saw how much work went into the sport," Evans recalls. "I was quite good at it, but I just didn't realise how good until these people at the camp started talking to me."

Evans got the confidence boost she needed and committed herself wholeheartedly to the sport.

In 2009 she won her first Australian title in the 800m freestyle and at the Delta Commonwealth Games the following year she won gold in the 4x200m freestyle relay.

With her endurance background, Evans believes that if she's ahead at the final turn she can outswim anyone.

The competition is going to be fierce. She'll be up against world record holder Rice, Scottish Commonwealth Games gold medalist Hannah Miley, and American star Elizabeth Beisel, who at just 19 will be competing in her second Olympic Games.

"I try not to think about my competitors," Evans says. "I have learnt that I can only control myself, not what others have done, or are doing at that point. Being the Olympics, so many different things can happen, so I believe it all comes down to who is the best prepared on the day."

Preparation is something Evans has done in spades – another favourite quote of hers being "There are no short cuts to any place worth going".

A typical training week includes:

20 hours in the Challenge Stadium pool, four hours

in the gym, three

Pilates sessions, two

massages and a

physiotherapy

session. It's >>



style

Swimmer Blair Evans is getting her mind in the zone for her Olympic debut in London. STM steals her day from the pool for a few hours of long-overdue pampering.

Art: Damián Portes
Styler: Sarah from
Glamour.com





Styler: Phillip Gull
Hair: SIBBA from
Dietrich Dits

a grueling schedule, and she relies heavily on coach Matt Magee, close family and motivating mantras to keep her inspired.

"I've written down quotes and stuck them all over my mirror. I look at them whenever something is going wrong or I'm having a bad day," she says. "I also have the Olympic rings up there that I look at when it's 4 and I'm battling to get changed. They give me that kick up the bum."

Another motivator is the phrase "when you're not practising sor else is". "That always gets me going," Evans says. "I think about competitors and it always makes me do one more set."

All that training and a looming Olympic Games debut doesn't leave much time for fun. Evans admits she gets very fatigued from punishing swim sets, and likes to relax and unwind at home with family and dog, Cody.

"I don't like to go out a lot. My coach likes that," she laughs.

Evans has spent seven years with coach and mentor Magee.

"Matt's tough," she says. "He has strong morals and high standards, which I think I have held up quite well."

Magee refers to Evans as the Ice Maiden. She doesn't mind.

"I guess I'm very cool in stressful situations and don't show any emotion," she says, "or maybe it's because when I'm mad I can give a death stare that could cut through ice."

What makes her mad? "Certain killer (training) sets. I have been let out of training once in 16 years. Sometimes I say to myself, 'If it's this tonight, I'm just going to get out and go home', and of course it's at that set – and of course I don't go home."

"Like any coach-athlete relationship, Matt and I have had our ups and downs, but I wouldn't have had it any other way, and certainly wouldn't be where I am today without him. In the pool, he's been like a second father to me, and I feel like I owe him a lot."

Evans says Magee ensures she has a social life away from the pool, and when STM manages to steal her away from training for a few days, it's clear she enjoys the change of pace – and the pampering.

"I have to admit I felt like a fish out of water having my hair and nails done, but I absolutely love it," she says. "Being a swimmer 99 per cent of the time I'm forever in a cap and goggles, or looking like a drowned rat coming from training. It's so nice to feel glamorous for a few hours."

She says she couldn't imagine life without swimming.

"I haven't even given a thought about what I want to do after this," she says. "After being in the sport for so long, it's not just about going up and down the black line like everyone thinks. There are a lot of friends and I am very lucky to travel around the world for free. Well, I get to use a lot of pools for free."

"I love everything about the sport. I love the competition and the relationships I have. I've established a lot of skills from traveling around the world from a young age, and I guess it has forced me to grow up quickly."

"At the end of the day, this is my job. I crave success – and the Olympics is where I want to be. First, I have to make the final, and if I get there, I believe anything can happen."

BLAIR EVANS

DATE OF BIRTH: April 3, 1991

HEIGHT: 175cm

WEIGHT: 65kg

OLYMPIC EVENT(S): 400m individual medley and a hopeful for the 4x200m freestyle relay

COACH: Matt Magee

TRAINS: Challenge Stadium (while Besty Park is being renovated)

2009: Evans wins her first Australian title in the 800m at the National Championships

2010: At the Pan Pacific Championships in California in August, Evans wins two bronze medals (200m and 400m freestyle) and a silver (4x200m freestyle relay)

At the Delhi Commonwealth Games in October, Evans takes home gold for her part in the 4x200m freestyle relay

2011: Evans claims her first world championship long-course medal in Shanghai as part of the relay team, winning silver in the 4x200m freestyle relay

2012: At the National Championships, Evans finishes second to Stephanie Rice in the 400m individual medley to secure her spot on the Australian Olympic Team



Alexander Wang
umber, \$445, and
notti, \$448. Belt
from Elm Goods and
Accessories, \$145, \$175
and \$200. \$55. Hair
by Tony & Gisele, SoBeau,
Cottman and City.

On our cover
Gareth England, \$145
and \$200. \$40
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