How ‘Eddie the Eagle’ Edwards Jumped Back into Education

Tuesday 1 March, 2022

As the Winter Olympics have drawn to a close we find out what happened to second chance learner Eddie the Eagle, the unlikely hero of the 1988 Games.

Eddie the Eagle’s iconic ski jumps at the 1988 Winter Olympics at Calgary endeared him to the world as the lovable underdog. Even those too young to remember the Games may have seen the eponymous film starring Taron Egerton as ‘Eddie’. His performance, finishing last in both the 70 and 90 metre events, along with his thick glasses worn under goggles that often misted up, caught the imagination of the worldwide media. But since achieving fame as the unlikely star of those games Michael Edwards (his real name) found a new direction in life through returning to learning.

His story is an inspiration to all those who dream of success yet face huge barriers. He had no equipment, little access to training facilities and no money. He was sleeping in cars, barns and even a psychiatric hospital in Finland because it was a cheap place to stay, all whilst training to achieve his dream of heading to the Olympics. It’s clear that what this plasterer from Cheltenham had in spades was a dogged determination to succeed – something he attributes to ‘middle child syndrome’.

Calgary 1988 turned Michael into a media celebrity, appearing on ‘The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson’ alongside Burt Reynolds.

“My feet didn’t touch the ground for about three years,” he says. “I was travelling all over the world, opening shopping centres, golf courses and having a whale of a time. But what I really wanted to do was carry on ski jumping.”

Sadly a change in the qualifying rules for competitions meant he couldn’t compete at an elite level any longer. Disappointing as that was, for Michael it was all about taking part rather than just winning. His comment on the 2016 film sums up his sentiments:

“They did such a great job with the film because it really captured the heart, spirit and essence of my story. Just getting to those Olympic Games was my gold medal. “

Fame was sadly not accompanied by fortune. All the money he earned from the Calgary games went into a trust fund which was badly managed. As a result Michael was declared bankrupt after retiring from competitive ski jumping. Working with the lawyers who put together his bankruptcy case sparked an interest in studying law.

“Law is very analytical so it suited my way of thinking. It’s an interest I always had.”

To gain a place at university to study law – his ambition - meant that Michael needed to gain more qualifications. So in 1998 he enrolled on a number of distance learning courses with the National Extension College. This meant he could study at home in his own time.

“It was a nice easy way back into education and I really enjoyed it,” he says. “I loved that flexibility. I could study whenever I had an hour to spare. I always thought that I might be able to go back to education at a later point. It’s amazing how flexible education has become and now anybody can start and stop education at any time”.

Michael gained a place at De Montfort University to study for a degree in law as a full-time student, having saved up enough money and supplementing it with part time work. Taking law up professionally is something that wasn’t feasible for him after completing his degree, as becoming a solicitor or barrister involves completing a legal practice course costing £20,000. His passion for law means that he reads law books for pleasure. And there are always other avenues open for someone with a law degree and Michael’s determination.

One opportunity cropped up out of the blue when Michael came back from Calgary and his manager organised him to sing a song called ‘Fly Eddie Fly’ which reached about number 50 in the charts back in 1988. Then a few years later Irwin Goodman wrote a song about ‘Eddie the Eagle’ and invited him to duet with him in Finland (though sadly it ended up as a solo project after Goodwin passed away from a heart attack shortly before he was set to record the song). That song reached number two in the Finnish

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pop charts. Michael spent six months singing in pubs, clubs and music festivals in Finland, but no-one translated the lyrics so, to this day, he never knew what he was singing about!

What have Michael's experiences taught him about learning and life?

"A lot of sportspeople, especially elite athletes, have trained from about five years old and all they've ever thought about is their sport and competing. When it comes to an end they're lost. It's only a very small percentage of athletes who go on to become trainers or pundits on television. But you can use the skills that you had in your sport to find something else. See if there are any courses locally or ones you can do from home. And be ready for any opportunities that come your way."

Above all Michael's experiences both as a sportsman and mature student have taught him perseverance.

"I had to fight tooth and nail for any kind of attention in sport, but that gave me tremendous resilience. Once I put my mind to doing something, I would go for it and that was the same with law. No matter how many people say 'No, no it can't be done', I want to prove to them that it can. There's always a way to learn and that's what I like about education now; it can fit any lifestyle. You can always make time and study. I encourage many people to never stop learning."

Although Michael never even came close to winning a medal he was the only British athlete who achieved a place in ski jumping at the 1988 Games. That in itself is a huge achievement.

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