

# Olympic Musings...

## By Alistair... Part One

*Next instalment in four years time!*

### The Qualification

The thought of Olympic qualification being at all possible, first occurred to me around June last year. I had raced two Olympic distance races, my best result being 10th at the 2006 Elite National Championships. It was decided that I was an Olympic hopeful and I was accepted onto British Triathlon's 'long list' of potential Olympic athletes.

I diligently filled in the endless forms which made me feel like I was applying for asylum, not the Olympics!

British Triathlon allowed me to race my first World Cup race in July 2007 in Salford. I finished 20th and 5th Brit. Quite a long way to go!

There were three Olympic qualifying races to qualify for our Olympic Team. The first two were in September and I wasn't selected for either of them and at the time I thought that decision was nice and fair.

The third race was the Madrid World Cup in late May 2008.

My Second World Cup experience was in Rhodes, Greece, the last race of my 2007 season. I got in a lucky break on the bike, held on for grim death on the run and was absolutely delighted with my second place.

Suddenly qualification seemed to be more of an achievable possibility, but it would all come down to the World Cup in Madrid.

Unfortunately my 2008 triathlon season did not start too well – my first few races on the other side of the world went badly.

I had to rely on my Rhodes result to get me on the start line of the Madrid qualification race. The race in Madrid went brilliantly for me. I turned up as late as possible to find everyone else much more nervous than I'd seen them before and some nice wet weather. The swim went ok, I made the lead group on the bike and tried to make the bike hard. Half way through the bike the heavens opened – perfect racing conditions for some, but not for some who only ride turbos when it rains. Apparently you're allowed to prepare for heat but not rain... shame; bang goes training in Yorkshire winter!

We were quite a large group coming off the bike, containing all the British athletes still in the race. My legs decided they were working on the run and I finished third and first Brit, securing my spot on the team. I was overjoyed to make the British Olympic Team.



Photos © Nigel Farrow



Photos: © Nigel Farrow



Triathletes in the Birds Nest stadium

Photos courtesy of Alistair Brownlee

### The Build Up

After Madrid, I returned home for 3 days before leaving for Vancouver for the World Championships. In Vancouver I won the World Championships U23 title, and crossed the finish line waving a large Yorkshire flag, which was interesting because no one seemed to recognise it – how could they! I then flew to Austin, Texas for our first Olympic heat preparation camp. Austin did its job hitting temperatures over 100F every day, but riding on three lane highways is not my cup of tea so I won't be hurrying back! I spent July at home training like I've never trained before and I left for our Olympic holding camp at the end of July. We were based on a tropical island off the coast of South Korea for about two and a half weeks. It was a superb training destination with a plentiful supply of roads, running trails and a nice pool. I enjoyed being looked after by our thousands of staff!

It was quite amusing that the British had

found it and kept it a "secret" from the other nations. I didn't realise how many of my triathlon competitors were there until I arrived at the airport to catch the flight to Beijing, checking in with triathletes from 15 other nations.

To avoid any harmful affects of the Beijing pollution we flew in as late as possible, but still five days before the race. The village was incredible. It's not a village at all but rather a large town, complete with pool, gyms, food halls, entertainment centres and 16,000 athletes and coaches from all over.

I dumped my bags and headed straight for the food hall which is bigger than two football pitches with a million different types of food. I particularly enjoyed seeing some superstars; Michael Phelps getting his burgers and Usaine Bolt lying on the grass eating an ice cream two hours before he broke the 200m World record.

All of the accommodation in the village was the same but different countries had their own blocks. The British block was furnished out really well with sofas, TV's and great beds. So much work goes into making it as comfortable as possible for British athletes.

The only place to run in the village was a 1km tartan loop and at dusk it was like being in the Rift Valley, Kenya. I just tried not to be overtaken by women. Not a good place to do an easy run!

As I had never been to Beijing before I went up to the race venue a few days before the race. It was about 20 miles outside Beijing in a fantastic setting – a large reservoir surrounded by mountains and an enormous spectator stand

on the dam wall. The race course consisted of a one lap swim along the dam wall, a 6 lap bike around a tough, specially built loop and a fairly quick 4 lap run.

I knew the bike course wasn't hard enough to make a decisive difference so I decided I would attempt at the start and towards the end of the bike to get away, any more attempts would add to the heat stress and tire me out for the run.

### Race Day

The morning of the race was an early start and before I knew it ten o'clock had arrived and I was standing on the Olympic start pontoon. I had chosen a start position close to a quick swimmer, in the hope that he would pull me up to the front of the field. I have never seen people look so nervous before, but the pressure of the Olympic Games is so much different to anything else I have ever experienced. The media, team and peer pressure just seemed to fuel the pressure I put on myself to perform. However as soon as the start gun went it all became irrelevant and it was a race, the same as any other race.

Triathlon swims can be a massive gamble and I just didn't seem to be able to get clear water. Fighting in the swim uses up a lot of energy, so it's best to be near the other athletes to get a draft, but not so close that you get a foot or arm in the face that disrupts your every stroke. I didn't think I was having a particularly good swim; I battled during the whole swim trying to pass people and exited the water in around 10th which was a massive surprise. At this point

we were right in front of the crowd although I couldn't hear them. After making up a few places through transition I jumped on my bike and went for it. The first few kilometres out of transition can be crucial; many athletes are tired from the swim and are trying to find their cycling legs. I thought this could be a good opportunity to get away from the rest of the field. My attempt was short lived however when Canada's 'domestique' pulled the pack up to me and I realised my cycling legs weren't quite there!

I settled into the pack and went with its normal surges and lulls feeling relatively comfortable. I had another quick attempt at a breakaway in the last 10km, which failed and decided to wait for the run.

As soon as I jumped off my bike I was convinced it was going to be a good day. My lucky black trainers slid on effortlessly and my running stride came to me without having to think about it.

I found myself at the front of the field after around 800m and just decided to run my own race as much as possible. At the first turn around I was amazed to see the field spread out meaning everyone was finding the pace tough, it was like a dream. At the end of the first lap I heard the commentators saying that the pace was fast and we were running under 2.50min/km pace, I knew they were wrong and had forgotten to take into account that the laps weren't exactly 2.5km. It wasn't that good a day!

Coming up the hill towards the end of the second lap one of the Spanish athletes attacked and I went with him. I was running in a group of three at the front of the Olympics, could it get any better? But as I later realised it was just the tactics of the more experienced athletes, trying to waste as little energy as possible. I still felt comfortable and in control. Then, at around the 7km mark, within 30 seconds my legs from feeling that they were made out of air, felt they were made out of lead. I couldn't believe it, there was nothing I could do.

Suddenly the race had become a survival exercise and I was having a nightmare. I tried to limit my losses and finished in 12th place with absolutely nothing left. I was initially gutted to be so close to an Olympic medal and miss out. Although it slowly dawned upon me that I had previously never managed to stay with the leaders for 3km, and I suddenly had led out the field for 7k... in the Olympic Games.



Photos courtesy of Alistair Brownlee

## After the race

After my race I had five days to enjoy the Olympics. I went to watch the athletics every night as well as a few other events. I visited Beijing's famous Silk markets and the Great Wall of China, which was what it says on the tin... "A blooming big wall!"

The Olympics was without a doubt as incredible an experience as I had been told it would be, but it was also one of the toughest I have experienced. There is no escaping the feeling that you are there to win a medal and in coming anywhere outside the medals I had failed. In the village without a medal you are just one of the 10,000 other athletes. The Olympics is an extremely rare experience so I didn't let this stop me from having a good time.

On the final night of the Games I marched into the Bird's nest stadium for the closing ceremony. It was amazing to be right there at the centre of the stadium mixing with athletes from other countries. When the London Bus came into the arena all of Team GB had to put on purple coats, which brought the entire team close to heat exhaustion!

I travelled home the next day on the so called 'party plane,' which should probably be called the 'hang over' plane. I was relieved to finally land in London although I had no idea it would be another hour before I could get off in front of live T.V. cameras.

I flew up to Leeds that evening and have never been so glad to be in the cool Yorkshire air. It's strange but one of the things I miss when in a hot climate is wearing a jumper. I got to wear much more than a jumper when I went to spend some time in Coverdale a few days later, and fill my lungs with good old refreshing Yorkshire air. It was really good to run for fun on the moors and ride my mountain bike after months of precise training for one race.

I really hope I am fortunate to go to the Olympics again and to be more successful next time!

Since returning back to good old blighty Alistair has been as busy as normal competing in the Great North Swim in Lake Windermere where he finished 7<sup>th</sup> in the elite wave of swimmers, which was won by Olympic silver medallist for the open water swim David Davies. An astounding 2,500 swimmers took part in the mile event which had various starts. On the triathlon scene he competed in the French Grand Prix race, and the Strathclyde Corus Mini Tri series, where he finished 1<sup>st</sup> in his heat, and then was beaten by fellow Olympiad Will Clarke in the final.

Alistair is not the only Brownlee who went to the Beijing Olympics, his brother Jonathan went there as part of the 2012 British Triathlon Development Squad. Jonathan is currently the National Champion and won bronze medals at both the World and European Junior Triathlon Championships.

# Alistair Brownlee

## THE OLYMPIAN

20 year old, Alistair is one of Yorkshire and Great Britain's biggest talents, and the way he competes, be it a low key race or the Olympics, is to give it his all, which befits his motto of 'Who dares wins'.

He may not have won in Beijing, but the manner in which he dared to take on the best in the world can only mean that in London 2012, when the triathlon is held in Hyde Park, he will be fitter, stronger and more focussed than ever. In fact awesome.

He gave it his all at the Olympics, which is only what you'd expect from this gritty Yorkshire man, who if you were to cut him in half, would have the Yorkshire Rose embossed right through him, just like a stick of Scarborough rock!



Photo © David Brent

**Date of Birth:** 23.04.1988

**Lives:** Leeds, Yorkshire

**Born:** Dewsbury, Yorkshire

**Height:** 184

**Weight:** 68

**Running club:** Bingley Harriers

**Coaches:** Jack Maitland & Malcolm Brown

### Major achievements in the last 3 years

#### 2008

- 12th Olympic Triathlon
- ITU Triathlon Under 23 World Champion
- Yorkshire X-C Champion, youngest ever senior winner
- Northern X-C Champion
- Silver National X-C Championships
- 5th BUSA X-C Championship
- Bronze Madrid BG Triathlon World Cup

#### 2007

- Yorkshire U23 Fell Champion
- Silver Rhodes ITU Triathlon World Cup
- ETU Triathlon Junior European Champion

#### 2006

- Yorkshire U20 X-C Champion
- Yorkshire U18 Fell Champion
- ITU Triathlon Junior World Champion
- ETU Duathlon Junior European Champion
- 17th World Mountain Running Trophy

Along the way Alistair has won 7 Yorkshire fell titles and 7 Yorkshire X-C titles throughout the age groups. He has British and Irish junior fell championship gold medals and also won a silver medal in the senior UKA Inter County Fell Running Championships. On Haworth moor he has won a Withins Skyline and an Auld Lang Syne fell race, BUT a Bunby Run, now there's a challenge for an Olympian!