

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame 2024: Spotlight on Marcel Gery - Olympic medallist, world champion, and philanthropist



Marcel Gery's journey to Aurora is a compelling tale of talent, intrigue, patience, courage, and success.

Many stages of his life read like the plotline of a Tom Clancy spy novel. Gery spent his formative years behind the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia, establishing himself as a top European swimmer and competing for the Soviet satellite republic internationally, before surrendering his passport to UN authorities in Yugoslavia and defecting to Canada in 1986, and swimming his way to Commonwealth Games and Olympic glory as a member of our national team.

It is a tale that Gery delivers with reflective poignancy and a high degree of gratitude.

Gery is open about describing his childhood, teenage years, and young adulthood spent in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War. He and his family lived under the shadow of the insidious Soviet Union. It is a cautionary tale in 2024.

?Growing up behind the Iron Curtain limited our view of the world. We didn't have the exposure of how the world was like, due to heavy censoring by the Soviets. We would get some Austrian TV at times and get a glimpse of the Western world. I started swimming early and made the Junior National Team at 9 and the Senior National Team at 14. When we competed in Europe, we would be heavily guarded and mysterious officials would board our buses to check on us.?

Gery got a glimpse of freedom during an international competition in the USA. Due to the Soviets' limited surveillance, his only supervisor was his coach.

?I was lucky enough to take trips to the USA and competed in the US Open Championships. My father-in-law was a defector to Holland in 1968 after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and I was able to visit him only in his hotel lobby. Luckily, I was able to follow in his footsteps because I met North York Aquatics Head Coach Jim Fowle in Austin, TX, at the US Swimming Championships. I owe so much to his club for changing my life.?

The Olympic hopeful was encouraged by the clandestine meeting in Texas, which was moderated by another Czechoslovakian defector and interpreter since the 21-year-old Gery couldn't speak English.

According to Gery, the ?defection seed was planted later that year in a meeting in Madrid where assistance and sponsorship was confirmed by the North York Aquatics Club.?

Gery's next step was a courageous one, indeed.

My wife and I defected through Yugoslavia with the support of Jim Fowlie and North York Aquatics. We surrendered our passports to the UN in what is now Belgrade, Serbia and were assigned to a refugee camp. Luckily, we were only in the camp for a week and, with the help of many Canadians, we emigrated on October 4, 1986 to Canada.

According to Gery, The North York Aquatics Club arranged quite the welcome for us. They greeted us by saying 'Welcome to Toronto' in our own language which made everything so much more comfortable.

Gery, a resident of Aurora since 1996, explained how his family became connected to the Town.

My wife's sales territory was across Aurora, Schomberg, and Barrie. She thought it was a beautiful town with green, hilly spaces. We took the plunge, bought our first house in Aurora in 1995, and moved from Toronto in 1996 when the kids were two and six years old. It was a great life for our boys growing up going to Lester B. Pearson and Aurora High School and playing for local soccer clubs. I joined the Remax York Group in 1999 and we've loved playing and living in the Town since.

His connections and contributions to local charities are near and dear to the Olympic swimmer's heart.

It's crucial work that we do. I work with many people as a real estate rep. I've had a nice career and I like to give back through my company. It's so important. Children's Miracle Network is one of my favorites because it brings so much joy to kids. My wife and I want to give back to those that really need our help.

In addition to his love of charitable initiatives, Gery expressed his excitement about being inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in November.

It feels fantastic to be recognized. Aurora is a small town, but it has produced so many great athletes. It's so nice to be part of this group. My clients know I have an athletic background, but I don't wear my athletic career on my sleeve. It feels nice any recognition feels nice. Swimming was a huge part of my life so many years were spent competing in the pool.

Winning the bronze medal in the 4 x 100 medley relay at the Barcelona 1992 Olympics is still a vivid memory for Gery.

I was so fortunate in that my mom, my wife even my two-year-old son was there at the Olympics in Barcelona. All I could think about was that it was long time coming and it was a relief to be there. Being a 27-year-old swimmer in the 1990s was really pushing the envelope. I got my chance and got a medal.

Gery also cherishes other sporting memories in his distinguished swimming career representing both Canada at the latter half of his career and Czechoslovakia in the first half of his career.

Winning at the 1990 Commonwealth Games in New Zealand it brings back great memories of gold in the 4 x 100 medley relay, silver in the 100M butterfly, and bronze in the 400M freestyle medley. On a Club Level, when I swam for the North York Aquatics Club, we won the national championship in 1987-1988 and we had quite the rivalry with the University of Calgary. Starting when I was 15, I won the European Championship three times swimming for Czechoslovakia.

Gery also won a 100M silver in butterfly at the 1991 Pan Pacific Championships and, foreshadowing their podium finish in Barcelona, the team of Gery, Jon Cleveland, Tom Ponting, and Mark Tewksbury won the silver in the 4 x 100 medley relay.

Despite these great memories and achievements, there is a sense of lost opportunities for Gery due to political decisions that affected him both in his birth country and his new country of residence.

I made the Olympic standard at 15 and had won the European Championship, but government officials did not send me to the 1980 Olympics because they thought I was too young. In 1984, I was ready for the next Olympics and we were in Rome competing at the

?7 Hills' Swimming Meet when we were told that the Los Angeles Olympics were going to be boycotted by the Soviet countries. There was a glimmer of hope when Romania decided to send its team to LA, but Czechoslovakia was too joined at the hip with the Soviets to go against the boycott. In 1988, I was ready to swim for the Canadian national team in Seoul, and had already missed two Olympics due to politics. Unfortunately, my citizenship was delayed as a landed immigrant and did not arrive in time because Sports Minister Otto Jelinek didn't want to speed up my immigration status. Unfortunately, he was worried it was going to be an election issue in 1988.?

Despite these setbacks, Gery's message to aspiring Olympic swimmers in Aurora is filled with hope.

?The bottom line is kids have a closer affiliation with Canadian swimmers, especially after seeing Summer MacIntosh this summer in France. When young kids become passionate and see these role models to emulate, anything can happen. The conditions in Canada are fantastic. This is one of the greatest countries in the world for young athletes. Any of these kids can reach their goal with hard work, perseverance, and patience.?

Gery's note about patience resonates-- given the butterfly swimmer's display of calm endurance as he saw three Olympic opportunities pass by him for political reasons in 1980, 1984, and 1988 on both sides of The Iron Curtain before seizing the day and the podium in New Zealand in 1990 and Spain in 1992.

The Aurora resident's inspirational journey to freedom and quest for Olympic fame is a great story to enshrine in perpetuity in the Town's Sports Hall of Fame.

By Jim Stewart