

# Eleanor Simmonds - Swimmer

Eleanor Simmonds MBE (11 November 1994- )

This girl won our hearts in the Paralympics in Beijing 2008 – and quite rightly. You remember her, the youngest British athlete in the team who won golds in the 100m and 400m freestyle swimming?

A double gold medallist, an MBE, 2008 BBC Young Sports Personality of the Year at only 14? Absolutely amazing.

Ellie, from Walsall, West Midlands, but who now lives and trains in Swansea, has achondroplasia or dwarfism. She has been swimming since the age of five but was inspired to train as an elite athlete after watching a British victory at the Athens Paralympics in 2004.

She tells it best in her own words: "I was watching my hero, Nyree Lewis, winning the gold medal in the 100 metres backstroke and I just told myself that I would like to do that."

So the family upped and moved to Swansea where there's a high-performance swimming centre, and the rest is history. And despite being feted as a hero and held up as an example to youngsters everywhere (which she undoubtedly is) she remains as down to earth and humble as you can imagine.

"Although there's so much going on in my life these days I don't get distracted from my schoolwork," she says. "I use the same concentration in at school as I do with the swimming."

And as well as getting on with her studies, Ellie still trains twice a day at 6am and again at 5pm, six days a week. And she says her friends treat her exactly as they did before - although she did get to "switch on the Christmas lights in Walsall."

To the able bodied it seems as though Ellie has overcome so much – but she doesn't see it that way and rarely mentions her disability. When asked about it she once replied: "I don't know when I became aware that I was smaller than other people. As far as I'm concerned I'm the same as everyone else. But I hope I can show disabled people what they can do.

"I want people who are disabled and not disabled who like swimming to see what they can achieve with it."

Ellie was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2009. At 14 she is the youngest person to have ever received this honour.

And what does she make of all this?

"While feeling as though I am living in a fairy tale, I want to work hard to keep my feet on the ground," she says. "I want to refocus my efforts on my training and my schoolwork so that by 2012 I can hopefully repay in part the wonderful accolades and affection that I have received."

How can someone so young be so wise, so gracious and such an inspiring role model?