

POSITIVE PERSPECTIVES

Chad Le Clos

Besides his fabulous smile and boyish charm, the thing that strikes you most about Chad Le Clos, when you meet him, is his humility. While he's broken many records, and racked up an impressive collection of medals, he still has that shy, unassuming, boy-next-door demeanour that we came to know and love when we watched him win his first Olympic medal. I spoke with him at the launch of Omega's new Seamaster Planet Ocean collection that was held on the 11th of November 2016, at the exclusive Lel Mirror Dor, situated high upon Northcliff Ridge with breathtaking views over Johannesburg.

The life of a professional athlete isn't easy. Besides the rigorous training schedules, high-pressure and high-stake performances, and string of public appearances, there is the inevitable slew of media interviews that those at the top of their game must endure on a regular basis. I wasn't the first journalist to interview Chad Le Clos that morning, and I wasn't the last either, and yet this brilliant young man, was welcoming and generous with his conversation.

I was curious to learn more about "everyday Chad", the person behind the intense training schedules, and the glare of the cameras. I wanted to know what drives an ordinary person to achieve extra-ordinary success, and how they handle the life that comes with that success.

Growing up in the public eye is a daunting prospect to most, and I was cognisant of Chad having every triumph, challenge and sorrow shared with the world as it happened, particularly over this past year. I started with the easy question, the one to which I already knew the answer, "Who was the first person

that really believed in you, in how far you could go with your talent, who gave you the faith and inspired you to believe in yourself?" His famous grin spreads widely across his face as he comes back quickly, "My dad, easy, always."

In his book, 'Unbelievable!', he shared much of his training regime with then coach Graham Hill, and I wanted to know what his average day looked like now, post-Olympics. "Training in the morning, coming back about 9:30 or 10am, having a little bit of a steak, a nap, training again about 3pm, back home at 6pm, PlayStation, have dinner, then go to sleep," he says. Since splitting with Hill, he's handling his own training, and recently announced via Twitter that he is moving to Cape Town in 2017, where he will continue his training in the pool at the Jan Van Riebeeck High School.

Le Clos has been nominated for both 'Sportsman of the Year' and for 'The People's Choice Award' in the 2016 SA Sports Awards that honour the achievements of South African athletes over the past year. He's up against some massively talented South Africans. The world of professional sport is one that not many people can relate to, in terms of the stress levels, and what it takes to achieve. The stress it exudes is different to most other professions, so I asked him how he deals with it, is it simply a matter of becoming slave to routine, and how does he keep from becoming bored or burnt out?

"It's about how you look at it," he says. "If you can look at it in a positive way, find ways to change it up, spice it up, then you'll get better. If you look at it as a routine, then you can sway, get burnt out, and get bored. If you

look at it as an opportunity to better yourself every day then you will improve."

"And all those hours in the pool?" I ask. "Where does your mind go?" His eyes light up and that huge smile comes out again. He says in a confident, here-to-take-over-the-world manner, "The mind is bulletproof!" which has us all laughing loudly.

I get a little more serious, for a moment, and ask him, "You have fought hard to get where you are professionally today, using your talent and determination. What would you fight for in life?" There's no hesitation when he answers, "I'd fight for my family and my friends, the people that are closest to me. There are a lot of negative things out there, but again, it's how you perceive things, how you protect what you believe is right, and stand up for what you believe is right. It comes down to the person."

He shares that his friends are still the same friends from when he was little, and that he doesn't have a huge circle of friends. I imagine that it's not easy to make and keep true friends, when you make the decision to follow your dream of becoming a professional athlete, and aim for the top spot. I ask him what the biggest sacrifice is that he's had to make to get where he is now, and whether he has any regrets.

"The biggest sacrifice, probably my teen years, not being able to go through the fun part, well, it depends on how you look at it, for me at the end of the day it was worth it. But not being able to go out with your friends when you're 17, 18, 19, is hard," he says.

Despite his own youth, he has become a role model to many young men and women, a position that carries pressure and

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"Everyone can train hard when they are feeling good. But it's the days when you're feeling bad that you have to step up. That's when champions step up. They pull through" – Chad Le Clos

responsibility. "There is so much pressure on our youngsters today to be a particular way or achieve particular things – how do you stay grounded, and what advice do you have for young people – those who are starting out on their own swimming journey - but also just about life in general," I ask him.

"The key thing to remember is that if you don't try to attempt something, you're never going to reach what you're trying to achieve," he says. "The first thing is getting to the start line, and then diving in the pool, and then putting in the hard yards, and then dreaming of going to the Olympics. So it's about going through the paces, if you can believe in what you believe in, whatever it is, then go for it, don't let people drag you down, don't let society drag you down. It's a game of how you perceive things, how you look at things. If you look at it in a positive way, then you can improve to those levels that you want to achieve. It's all about what you want to achieve."

I tell him that a tweet he replied to from my daughter during his first Olympics had a huge impact on her at the time. She was amazed that someone so important and busy responded to her, and that she spent the summer in the pool swimming laps with her "eye on the prize". I'd always assumed he had a social media team manning his accounts, but he tells me that he has always tried to reply personally to messages because he believes it is important, and that he gets so much from the messages he's sent. I shared the question she had asked me to ask him, "Who do you hope not to let down". It's a poignant question, and he goes a little quiet before answering, "Obviously my parents. I don't want to let anyone down - at this stage South Africa - so when I didn't win this year, it was a difficult one for me. I didn't want to let down the country, the fans, that's important."

I decide it's time to for some more light-hearted questions and ask him to share three items on his bucket list. He laughs, "Skydiving. What else? I want to hold a snake because I'm scared of snakes, and I want to do shark cage diving. I'm scared of sharks, snakes and a little afraid of heights, so I want to do all three."

I ask him what's on his playlist for training at the moment and he says, "I like a mix of stuff. I like some old stuff, I like Elton John, and

Eminem is nice to race to, I like Ed Sheeran too. A bit of a mix is nice."

"Imagine yourself at 75 – what are you doing?" I ask him. He bursts out laughing, "I hope to still be playing PlayStation! I hope to be the best Fifa player in the world! I'd say by the time I'm 60 or 65 I'll be the best Fifa player in the world" At this his manager Jamie Cunningham and I burst out laughing and Chad joins in. It is that playful, spirited side that so often shines through – that - and his dedication and passion to his chosen sport. One does wonder what would have happened if he'd chosen to go the soccer route instead.

We live in a time when we have an emoticon for every occasion, so as a parting question I ask him which emoji he uses the most. His expression is priceless. "The winking face, you know the one, it can be used for lots of things" he laughs. ■ Lindsay Grubb

Chad Le Clos has been an Omega brand ambassador since 2011, and as he pointed out on the day of the Seamaster Planet Ocean collection launch, "Besides the obvious affiliation to the Olympic Games, pretty much all of my gold medals have been won through the Omega timing system."

"Through swimming and the Olympic Games, I've always known Omega for their precision and innovation. But it's always exciting to see their new watches and to try them on. Of course, you still get that famous precision, but you also get a beautiful timepiece that looks great. I first got to see the new Planet Ocean in Rio and it's definitely my favourite watch to wear right now."

As the Official Timekeeper of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Omega has spent a lot of time with Chad le Clos this year. The brand witnessed and timed his medal-winning achievements in August and was proud to stand alongside him again for this exclusive watch celebration. For the evening, Chad wore an Omega Seamaster Planet Ocean 600M "Deep Black". This popular GMT divers' watch is now in Omega boutiques and is notable for its sleek ceramic casebody. It also harnesses many of the same breakthrough technologies as the rest of the new Planet Ocean collection.

www.Omegawatches.com/deepblack

