

Golden in the Eyes of Many

Featuring Daniel Igali

Athlete Article



Baraladei Daniel Igali was born and raised in the deep interiors of the Niger Delta, in the village of Eniwari, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. His personal quest to excel in wrestling truly began in 1990 when he was 16. In Eniwari, an impoverished community without organized sporting programs, wrestling was and still is a part of the culture. In the same way that hockey is innate to Canadians, so too is wrestling to the Ijaws.

The country (Nigeria) did not offer competitions at different age categories, but with a family of twenty brothers and sisters, Daniel did not have a shortage of wrestling partners.

Realizing that he had talent, Daniel competed in the 1990 Senior National Wrestling Tournament and won. But it was but 10 years later that he would return to his hometown as a national hero. In 1993 and 1994, Daniel became the African Champion after winning the 62kg weight class in Pretoria, South Africa, and Cairo, Egypt, respectively. But his career didn't truly take off until he arrived in Canada for the 1994 Commonwealth Games. He finished 11th overall, but the disappointing finish was the last thing on his mind. The political situation in Nigeria was extremely volatile, and it was clear that pursuing both an education and career in sports was next to impossible. He made the difficult decision to remain in Canada.

Tom Murphy was instrumental in helping him adjust to his new life in a strange land. He was later introduced to Dave McKay at Douglas College, and subsequently to Mike Jones at Simon Fraser University, both of whom were mentors and friends. With Mike and Dave's guidance, Daniel's record of 116-0 over three years in collegiate competition was a formidable achievement that is yet to be rivaled at the NAIA. In 1996, in the final match of the Clansman International Tournament, Daniel was beating American Terry Steiner 7-4. With less than ten seconds remaining, he gave up three points, and lost the match in overtime. It was a turning point in Daniel's career as he vowed never to be embarrassed like that again.

With the help of his coaches, he immediately changed his training regimen, and went on to place 4th at the 1998 World Championships in Tehran, Iran. In 1999, he placed second at the World Cup, though many believed he deserved to win, and in September 1999, became Canada's first men's world wrestling champion when he won six straight bouts to claim the gold medal in the men's 69 kilograms division at the world freestyle wrestling championships in Ankara, Turkey.

At the Sydney 2000 Olympics, he reached the pinnacle of sports success when he was crowned Olympic Champion (becoming the first Canadian to win a wrestling Olympic gold medal). Igali's victory dance around the Canadian flag and the kiss he placed upon it afterwards has become an iconic Canadian image. He dedicated his gold medal to Maureen Matheny, Igali's surrogate mother in Canada, who passed away in 1999. Igali was inducted into the Canada Sports Hall of Fame in 2007.

Shortly after his Olympic win, he established the Daniel Igali Foundation and began work on building a school in his Eniwari village- The Maureen Matheny Academy. In 2002, in partnership with Canadian University Students Overseas (CUSO), which has overseen the project, he began securing funds for the school. In total, more than \$600,000 has been raised. In 2006, Igali's dream project officially opened its doors to the children and community of Eniwari. He continues to raise funds and awareness for the school and hopes to build more like it in the Niger Delta.



Igali divides his time between living in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada and overseeing the Maureen Matheny Academy in Eniwari, Nigeria and recently coached the Nigerian Wrestling team at the 2012 London Olympics.

Courtesy of igali.com