

Determination key to Olympian's success

August 21, 2001

If you take a peek at Waneek Horn-Miller's ankle, you'll see a turtle.

It might seem like an odd tattoo for an Olympic athlete, especially a water polo player who's known for her fast, aggressive style in the pool.

However, for Horn-Miller, it's an image that carries deep resonance: she is a Mohawk, and in the Mohawk creation story, North America emerged from the back of a great turtle — it is "Turtle Island".

"I wanted something very old," Horn-Miller said last Wednesday, during the First Nations Summer Games in La Ronge. "Even though I was wearing a Canadian uniform and I'm very proud of that, I wanted something to remind me of my culture, where I come from."

For many Canadians, the name "Waneek Horn-Miller" conjures up another image: the willowy co-captain of Canada's women's water polo team, posing nude with a feather in her long, straight black hair and a ball (strategically placed) in her hands, on the cover of the Canadian edition of "Time" magazine.

However, Horn-Miller had already made the front page of newspapers across Canada 10 years earlier, when a photographer snapped a picture of the then-14-year-old, bloodied and clutching her four-year-old sister. The image was captured during the mass confusion of the Oka crisis, moments after Horn-Miller was stabbed just above her heart with a Canadian soldier's bayonet.

Combined, those three images — the turtle, the body and the bayonet wound — speak volumes about who Waneek Horn-Miller is. At 25, she is a graduate of Carleton University's political science program. She already has more than 20 gold medals from the North American Indigenous Games, and says she intends to "go back and defend them until (she's) old and gray." She has worked as a host for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, and is also a public speaker.

Her teammates say she's a warrior — and she agrees. But in the Mohawk language, warrior means "keeper of the peace".

"Your job (as a warrior) is first to protect your family, to provide for your family, and to provide a good role model," says Horn-Miller. When she's home — her roots are in Kahnawake, Quebec — Horn-Miller is expected to help with the housecleaning and occasionally babysit her nieces and nephews, even if it means taking them to the pool during training sessions.

However, her deepest ties are to her

sister, the child she clutched in her arms at Oka. "I would give my life before I'd let my little sister feel pain... and I figured out that if she was going to know that, I'd have to show her," Horn-Miller said.

Knowing who's watching has helped Horn-Miller push herself to the heights of athletic achievement, regardless of the price. Some training sessions were so in-



Photo by Carmen Pauls

Waneek Horn-Miller, a Mohawk swimmer and co-captain of Canada's Olympic women's water polo team, talked to youth at the First Nations Summer Games about her upbringing and her career.

tense that she vomited, but then she headed right back into the pool. Another time, the youth stood up to a coach who was berating her. "If my mother heard me letting you call me stupid," she informed him, "she'd pull me out of the water and kick my ass."

Horn-Miller's mother, activist Kahn-Tineta Horn, has always been her daughter's strongest supporter. In 1984, eight-year-old Waneek saw fellow Kahnawake resident Alwyn Morris become the first aboriginal Canadian to win an Olympic gold medal, when Morris and teammate Hugh Fisher captured the top spot in kayaking.

"I said, 'Mom, I want to go to the Olympics,'" Horn-Miller recalled. "And she said, 'You know what? You can do it.'"

Horn-Miller stills remembers the moment when she and her teammates walked out to the pool 16 years later, at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and saw her mother in the stands, tears streaming down her face.

"There she was, watching her baby at the Olympics," Horn-Miller said. "She proved to us that anything is possible."

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