



Open Heart, Open Mind

By Clara Hughes

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From one of Canada's most decorated Olympians comes a raw but life-affirming story of one woman's struggle with depression.

In a world where winning meant everything, her biggest competitor was herself.

In 2006, when Clara Hughes stepped onto the Olympic podium in Torino, Italy, she became the first and only athlete ever to win multiple medals in both Summer and Winter Games. Four years later, she was proud to carry the Canadian flag at the head of the Canadian team as they participated in the opening ceremony of the Vancouver Olympic Winter Games. But there's another story behind her celebrated career as an athlete, behind her signature billboard smile.

While most professional athletes devote their entire lives to training, Clara spent her teenage years using drugs and drinking to escape the stifling home life her alcoholic father had created in Elmwood, Winnipeg. She was headed nowhere fast when, at sixteen, she watched transfixed in her living room as gold medal speed skater Gaétan Boucher effortlessly raced in the 1988 Calgary Olympics. Dreaming of one day competing herself, Clara channeled her anger, frustration and raw ambition into the endurance sports of speed skating and cycling. By 2010, she had become a six-time Olympic medalist.

But after more than a decade in the gruelling world of professional sports that stripped away her confidence and bruised her body, Clara began to realize that her physical extremes, her emotional setbacks, and her partying habits were masking a severe depression. After winning bronze in the last speed skating race of her career, she decided to retire from that sport, determined to repair herself. She has emerged as one of our most committed humanitarians, advocating for a variety of social causes both in Canada and around the world. In 2010, she became national spokesperson for Bell Canada's Let's Talk campaign in support of mental health awareness, using her Olympic standing to share the positive message of the power of forgiveness.

Told with honesty and passion, *Open Heart, Open Mind* is Clara's personal journey through physical and mental pain to a life where love and understanding can thrive. This revelatory and inspiring story will touch the hearts of all Canadians.

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Editorial Review

Review

“An amazing athlete, a great person, and a wonderful motivating example for all!” (Joé Juneau, ice hockey Olympic medalist and former NHL player)

“Clara Hughes is both an extraordinary and an ordinary Canadian. This honest memoir reveals the determination of a champion to overcome external adversity and internal struggles, finding her place as an athlete, an advocate, and a person.” (Dr. David Goldbloom, Senior Medical Advisor, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health)

“Clara’s story is just like her: It is energetic, strong, full of character, and very powerful. You really feel the determination within her and you cannot fail to wish you could award her another gold medal for the way she turned her life around and makes it her duty to help others.” (Gaétan Boucher, speed skating Olympic medalist)

“Clara brings us along on her journey from childhood to her incredible Olympic success, through her victories and her failures, all while dealing with her own personal torment. I now believe Clara to be superhuman, not for her incredible Olympic success and athletic feats, but for her dogged battle against depression, first for herself and now for the rest of us through her advocacy work. I couldn’t stop reading.” (Johann Koss, CEO, Right to Play International)

“Her book puts us on the handlebars and rides us headlong into a childhood tainted by her father’s alcoholism, a multi-generational addiction pattern that affected herself and both her grandfathers as well. [...] With the same stealth and fight that brought her gold, Clara Hughes is talking, sharing and learning. [...] She’s unstoppable, even in the off-season.” (*Vancouver Sun*)

“...honest and courageous.” (*Guelph Mercury*)

“... a fine, honest book, a revealing look inside the life of a world-class athlete who also happened to have the intelligence and sensibility to regard herself while this was happening. It’s like having an unusually perceptive journalist with unparalleled access to the mind of an athlete.” (*Montreal Gazette*)

About the Author

Six-time Olympic medalist Clara Hughes became the only athlete to win multiple medals in both the Summer and Winter Games. She is a member of the Order of Manitoba and an officer of the Order of Canada, has received a star on Canada’s Walk of Fame, and was inducted into Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame. Hughes is the national spokesperson for Bell Canada’s Let’s Talk initiative, a campaign dedicated to breaking down the stigma of mental health. In 2014, she was awarded the Meritorious Service Cross, which recognizes those whose outstanding personal commitment has brought honour to Canada. She lives with her husband, Peter, in Canmore, Alberta, and continues to enjoy bike touring and hiking.

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Open Heart, Open Mind

WITH GLOWING HEARTS

It started with my being asked to be the flag-bearer. I was sure I had the capacity to carry our flag and still perform. My first race was thirty-six hours after the march into BC Place, but I wasn't concerned. Without hesitation, I accepted. The Vancouver Winter Games in 2010 were my fifth games. I thought I'd been through it all but competing at home took the stress to a new level. I was propelled from the hermetic existence of training and became, for a few days, the single focus of the biggest sporting event in Canadian history.

Richmond City Hall became Olympic central for the press conference. The secrecy surrounding the identity of the flag-bearer ended there on January 29, 2010. I stood at the top of an ornate staircase that wound down to a sea of newspaper reporters, TV media crews, politicians, Olympic officials, teammates, and citizens. I felt an elation equalling my best athletic moments. For the first time in my life, I felt that bliss without having to skate or ride myself through a world of pain.

The press conference turned my elation to despair. All my confidence and excitement was shattered as soon as I entered the obligatory media scrum. Reporters asked about the flag-bearer curse, the cost of venues, and protests on the streets. Anchor Wendy Mesley jokingly introduced me as "a hard-drinking . . . troublemaker" on CBC's *The National*.

I had no idea that after agreeing to carry my country's flag I'd be expected to be an expert on all things Olympic, but I tried to answer all the controversial questions as well as I could.

I left the press conference in a state of shock. I'd made a mistake and a big one at that. There was no way out, and I knew it. My fifth Olympic Games had begun.

I sat alone in the apartment that'd been provided as part of our home-team advantage. My husband, Peter, set it up and made sure I had everything I needed to succeed, but I knew none of this would help with how I was feeling. I opened my laptop to write my coach an e-mail, thinking she'd have some solid advice. That's when I saw an e-mail from my good friend Tewanee Joseph.

Tewanee was the CEO of the Four Host First Nations (FHFN), made up of the Lil'wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Every Olympic moment would take place on their territorial land. I'd met him a few years earlier when looking for a connection to the Olympics deeper than sport. I'd sent him a note asking for his help in connecting me with the First Nations youth. I wanted to share the Olympics with them and, in turn, feel a connection to their beautiful land.

His e-mail was an invitation to a brushing-off ceremony. While all my competitors moved deeper into bubbles that isolated them from everything but sport, Peter, a few of my closest support staff, and I travelled to find out exactly what this ceremony was.

Tewanee's home was on the small patch of Squamish First Nations Reserve on Vancouver's North Shore. We walked into the warmth of the house, greeted by an abundance of food and smiles. All offered warm hugs; all were eager to make us welcome. After having been more or less institutionalized through a program of elite training, not to mention the pressure I put on myself, I was relieved to relax and forget my responsibilities.

These feelings strengthened when Tewanee's wife, Rae-Ann, gave me a silver hummingbird pendant her son had picked out for me. She told me it would give me wings to fly. I wore it the entire Games.

The brushing-off ceremony was conducted amid candles, singing, and chanting, with kids laughing and playing in the background. An elder addressed us in his native language. His gestures and soothing voice, like the tones of Mother Nature, made me feel he was telling the story of the earth, wind, sun, and rain. I sat smiling with the others, taking in the energy and the calmness of his voice, and feeling completely within the moment.

Another elder addressed each of us in turn, opening our hearts to the energy of the flame and brushing away negativity. He told us, "I cannot heal you of your pain. Only you can heal yourself with your open heart and your open mind."

At one point, Tewanee's thirteen-year-old daughter stood in the middle of the room, crying. Though my friends and I didn't know what was happening, we listened respectfully as the elders told her, "Thank you for sharing your beautiful tears with us. Let them flow."

Since I knew I carried a pool of raw feelings and unshed tears inside of me, I was grateful to see such despair welcomed as powerful and good.

One of the elders spoke to me in English: "You can only attract success for yourself if you want every single one of your competitors to be good and strong. When you wish good things for others, this comes back to you. The strength to be kind is not often asked for, but this is perhaps the most important strength to have."

The elder then addressed Peter and my team: "You are Clara's force field, her circle of strength—there to support her. She needs you." They all turned their eyes toward me. I felt utterly loved.

The stress of bearing the flag and competing melted away. I left armed with clarity, ready for the Games, our Games.

As host nation, Team Canada would be the last of eighty-two nations to enter the stadium. That meant a long, restless wait. There were 206 of us in our red jackets, impatiently watching the ceremony on our cellphones, hearing the boisterous cheers as the crowd welcomed each team—Albania and Ghana and Ethiopia with only 1 member each, the United States with 215.

Now, it was Team Canada's turn to cross the threshold into the expanse of BC Place. I could see little soap bubbles falling like snow from the sky, a magical faux-winter wonderland in the unfathomable hugeness of the stadium.

I examined my flag holster with belated concern: Did I use one hand or two to insert the pole? No one had explained any of this to me. As the gap widened between the rest of the team and me, I felt stranded, but the faces around me were alight with the wonder of the moment.

A volunteer yelled: "Take the flag!" He thrust it into my hand, then counted down: "Five, four, three, two . . ."

I was ordered to march, but before I did, I took a moment to look up at the perfect red-on-white maple leaf, waving like one of nature's own on a late fall Manitoba day.

I held up our flag, proudly, for the whole world to see, knowing that as our country's flag-bearer, I had become something much bigger, stronger, and more beautiful than just me. I remembered the motto of these Games: With Glowing Hearts. And realized: This is it.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Steven Campbell:

Do you have favorite book? In case you have, what is your favorite's book? Book is very important thing for us to understand everything in the world. Each reserve has different aim or perhaps goal; it means that book has different type. Some people feel enjoy to spend their time to read a book. These are reading whatever they take because their hobby is usually reading a book. Think about the person who don't like reading through a book? Sometime, man or woman feel need book when they found difficult problem or perhaps exercise. Well, probably you will need this Open Heart, Open Mind.

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