



Daniel Wiffen was disqualified from his first 1,500m race for diving in before the buzzer. Now he is an Olympic champion

Michael Foley

After his race on Tuesday night Daniel Wiffen flopped back into his room at the Olympic Village around 1.30am, ate some pizza and gave his gold medal the spare bed. Sleep didn't come for hours. How could it? He found the RTE commentary of his race and soaked it in. Then he watched his own race video, seeking confirmation of the things he already knew. "I was pretty happy with my technique," he says. "Obviously being the first hand on the wall was most important. But I perfectly planned it, apart from the first 300 metres that were pretty ropery." It was 3.30am when he eventually drifted off. The following morning he



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made a beeline for the dining hall that doles out the sumptuous chocolate muffins he had promised himself the night before. Taste rating? "Nine out of ten," he says. The rest of the day was spent holding back a tide of calls on his time. His twin brother Nathan and his parents did some talking to the circling media. On Tuesday night Wiffen had talked about looking forward to the next time he could see them again. But they are with him, walking every step of the week. They were with him in the gentle stream of tears as Wiffen stood on the podium and the anthem played. "I never cry, which was surprising," he says. "But [the feeling], I kind of expected it." They were there driving him in that excruciating last length to the wall, Wiffen's arms burning like molten steel. When the twins were young, their father Jonathan would bring them swimming to Lisburn every morning and sit poolside with the other dads, catching up on work. After Jonathan moved to India to work, their mother Rachel collected them at school in Armagh with dinners to eat on the way to Lurgan for training, then more dinners when they came home. Swimming was their world. Their obsession. When an Olympic gold medal needed winning, Wiffen's mind

returned to those mornings in Lisburn, the dinners swallowed like Tic Tacs. "When you're going down that last 50 metres you think about all your best memories," he says. "And mine are full of my parents and all they did to make me the swimmer I am. They're the reason I won the medal at the end." He often wondered why they did it. Their older brother Ben had pulled his brothers into swimming but neither seemed exceptional. In his first 1,500m race, Daniel dived in before the buzzer. Then Nathan fell in. Jonathan was the poolside announcer, obliged to tell everyone Daniel had been disqualified.



They torture and push each other like brothers do, but the link is unbreakable. When Daniel preferred the United States to Loughborough for their swimming scholarships, Nathan won the argument. On Tuesday night Wiffen somehow picked out his brother's voice in the extraordinary din, connected like sonar. "Go Daniel!" "I don't know how I heard it," he says. "I was like, that's incredible. My head was like, this is just meant to be. He's my twin. It's kind of crazy that he's in the stands watching me win Olympic gold and he's done everything to help me as well. We trained in Dublin together until I had to leave for Paris. It's really good to have him there because he

keeps me grounded. He made sure to let me know that it wasn't going to come easy." In every way, Wiffen's ambition obliged him to reject every accepted norm, from facilities and opportunities to Irish swimming's modest expectations. At Loughborough Wiffen found himself at the tail end of an elite group weighed down with Olympic medals and aspiring champions. Gradually he reeled them in. "I started from the bottom but I grinded and worked hard every single day. One hundred per cent I always believed something special was coming. I wasn't a great swimmer when I was younger and plenty of coaches said I wasn't going to make it. But I love the sport. I love training. And it's that love for the sport that makes me keep achieving." Olympic medals weren't what drove him either. It was being first, breaking boundaries. In the past two years Wiffen had already become the first Irish male swimmer to set world and European records. He was the first Irish Commonwealth champion (where he competed for Northern Ireland in 2022) and the first Irish world champion. Making an Olympic final and winning a medal broke more new ground. Running back through his collection of national records, he reckons he's set between 50 and 60. "I'm still achieving firsts," he says. "First Irish swimmer to break an Olympic record and win a gold medal [in an 800m freestyle final]. And there's still a lot more I can do." It was a night boiled down in the first telling to Wiffen, all brash

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confidence, rechristening himself Olympic champion on TV and naming a thunderous downpour outside as Storm Daniel. But these moments of supreme triumph always peel back the skin. "The only difference from a normal day is that I was shitting myself. I've never been this nervous, which is obviously not weird to say in the Olympic final, but I couldn't even nap. That was the weirdest thing." That afternoon Jon Rudd, the high performance director with Swim Ireland, put Wiffen in a car and found a quiet swimming pool. They talked in the car about everything: swimming, college, family. "Life stuff," Rudd says. "I'm a dad of four. It's like me sitting there with one of my sons." The purpose of the trip was a simple swim to ease out the joints and soothe any strains. Then Wiffen asked Rudd if he had a watch. "Time me for a 100, will you?" "Really," replied Rudd. "We said we weren't doing this."

"No," Wiffen said. "I need to know." "He gracefully slid up and down the pool in a ridiculously fast time for someone who looked like they were doing nothing," Rudd says. "He said: 'Don't tell me the time, I'm going to guess.' " Wiffen was a second off. He was swimming quicker than he thought. Sometimes the best ones need that extra prompt to reassure them that they're ready. "He was," Rudd says. That self-belief coursed through him in the call room before the 800m final. "I had no doubt in my mind," Wiffen says. "I had this won already before I walked out. I knew there would be nerves. I was in lane four in an Olympic final. But when you're winning in lane four it's even better." An hour after winning his gold medal Wiffen sat in front of the assembled global swim media flanked by the silver and bronze medallists: the defending Olympic champion Bobby Finke, famed for his lethal kick, and Gregorio Paltrinieri, a renowned veteran of long-distance swimming. The questions went everywhere. What reception did Wiffen expect back home? "I'm sure it's gonna be massive. I remember the last Olympics when the rowing boys brought back their gold. It was crazy." What did he remember from being an extra in *Game of Thrones* with Nathan? "I was in the greatest TV show of all time, I was in the Red Wedding scene. All I remember, I was sitting on a step in front of Walder Frey or Filch from *Harry Potter* [the actor David Bradley]. He's a very nice man." Do you want to get back into acting? "If they want to catch me in the summer, I don't mind." Finke and Paltrinieri smiled along in amusement. They have seen Wiffen develop. They have tracked and hunted him. His great strength as an endurance swimmer is the metronomic recording of splits that scarcely drift more than a few tenths of a second from each other. Where some swimmers blitz the field early and others unleash a final late kick, Wiffen's consistency is designed to wear down every competitor into gradual, agonising death by a thousand strokes. "He's young and he's going to be doing really well in the future," Finke says. "He loves to train. I've seen his vlogs before. Sometimes I use it to motivate me in practice. Just seeing what he's doing and how he's approaching and the records he wants to break." "Yeah, same," Paltrinieri says. "I watched the vlog. I've been around for a while, so I saw a lot of guys coming. He's a great competitor and he pushes me every time, every day in practice, because I know he's pushing as well. Today I was telling everybody that you [Daniel] were the favourite, to put pressure on you and not on me. That was the plan for me: not to think that [he] was the favourite..." Paltrinieri paused. "But I really thought he was the best in the field today." Wiffen returned to the pool yesterday to obliterate the opposition in his heat of the 1,500m freestyle. He hunts more gold today in the event that always looked his strongest, with the 10km Seine swim on Friday in the back of his mind. "Once I get in the water I know I'm the best prepared in the field," he says. "Maybe it's a special connection. I couldn't tell you." Like nothing we've ever seen before.

Adeleke peaking at perfect time for toughest test yet

Athletics

Michael Foley

Ten days ago the Austin American-Statesman newspaper took a proper look at the 30 students and alumni from their local college at the University of Texas heading to the Olympics and ranked them in ascending order of those most likely to win medals. They started with Emelia Chatfield from Haiti, a 100m hurdler seeking to win her country's first medal since 1928, and finished with the Hungarian swimmer Hubert Kos, world champion in the 200m backstroke – who, sure enough, then actually did take gold in the event. Some of the names in between leapt off the page. There was Julien Alfred, the flying sprinter from St Lucia. Scottie Scheffler, with his degree in finance, was parachuting in from golf's distant planet. Kevin Durant was seeking his fourth Olympic basketball gold medal. Carson Foster was a key anchor for the American swim team. In the middle of them all, Rhasidat Adeleke was pegged at number 11, not absolutely central to the conversation around the 400m, but not out of it either. Which felt about right. All the signs over the past month suggest Adeleke's season is rising to its crescendo at the perfect time: a silver medal at the European Championships that was achieved in the middle of a heavy training block, followed by her first victory in a Diamond League race last month, running a shade slower than her national record. All steep, ascending steps on the stairs. When the heats begin tomorrow morning, overtaking the remarkable competition around her this week will demand something beyond anything she has achieved yet. A few months back Adeleke reckoned she would need to dip under 49 seconds to win a medal. Her coach, Edrick Floreal, was more pragmatic. Follow the plan and attack the race in front of her, he said. Don't get hung up on times. Going below 49 seconds may not be necessary. His logic was simple. In eight world and Olympic 400m finals since 2012 only two winners have been required to dip below 49 seconds. Championship races are simply a different test. The scale of the challenge facing Adeleke has come into sharper focus as her opponents have flicked up the gears in the past few weeks. Nickisha Pryce and Natalia Kaczmarek, who finished ahead of Adeleke at the European championships, both broke the 49-second barrier at the Diamond League in London last month. A handful of others come to race with better personal bests than Adeleke, if they're in the form to reach them. Her own 49.07secs at the European Championships remains the third fastest time of the year among the competitors starting this week, but also now represents the minimum baseline for success. How

far she can actually reach? Who knows? Despite the soaring expectations and Adeleke's propulsion from promising athlete to the brink of genuine global stardom before she turns 22, this is still her beginning. In the two years since she began running the 400 metres her running style and mental outlook on the distance has been opened up and worked on relentlessly. After her posture became more stooped as fatigue kicked in at the end of the European final, the core work that followed was evident in her strength to close out victory at Monaco a month later. Floreal also insisted she could have broken 49 seconds in Rome if she followed his instructions more closely. That battle between Adeleke's natural caution and the standards Floreal sets for her is continuous; all that planing and polishing of thought, tactics and technique is a reminder that Adeleke is still building the best version of herself. But she learns fast. When Michael Johnson watched her during the 2023 NCAA heats, he offered some advice about tidying up her technique to achieve more power from her arms. Floreal had previously described her arm movement like someone washing the dishes.



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Adeleke's response drew more praise from Johnson. "I am so thankful when an athlete sees respectful critique as helpful," he said. "Today there's a risk it will be seen as an attack." A year later she was an NCAA champion. Another post she shared from Johnson recalled how he only became a truly great 400m runner when he learnt to attack the race from the start. In Monaco last month she covered the first 200 metres in 23.25 seconds. Flying. She also knows this week is about managing expectations. Hers first, before worrying about anyone else. "Failing is so much more than just losing a race," she said in April. "Failing is not being at my own expectations, not executing, not having the right tactics, not having the right mindset. I'm very hard on myself. I know what I want out of my career and it's just all in stages. The fear of failure is not like losing one race. It's bigger than that." People expect now, in every way. With a star power that goes far beyond Ireland, winning a medal could see her worldwide commercial value soar into millions. Back home the flags and posters are appearing around Tallaght. Two billboards hang outside Presentation Community College in Terenure with a simple message. "We are behind you every step of the way! Go Rhasidat!" A stunning mural on Chatham Row unveiled last week in Dublin depicts Adeleke as a strong female figure, painted on a brick wall with an Irish singlet and crest that reads 'Mise Éire'. I am Ireland. Win a medal this week and she will quickly be enshrined as an emblem for an inclusive, newly-ambitious Ireland of the future. For the next few days she has the freedom to just be the girl in the starting blocks, chasing down her dream.

