

# BRETT HEYL

THE CONTENDER  
GMVS CLASS OF 2000



Sebastien Chaplais

~ By Kim Reynolds

Although a chance encounter at the J3 Junior Olympics in 1995 led Brett Heyl '00 to GMVS, little else has been left to chance in Heyl's impressive athletic career. After falling in the final JO event, Heyl stood up and found himself next to Adam Julius. "We talked for a while, mostly about how I was leaving the next week to go kayak in North Carolina," Heyl said. "We really hit it off, and I knew that I wanted to go to GMVS."

Heyl was just fourteen when he arrived at GMVS that fall. He had just competed at his first kayaking Junior World Championships in the Czech Republic (Heyl paddles K-1 whitewater kayak slalom) a few weeks before starting classes. He managed to train for and compete in both ski racing and kayaking through his junior year when he decided to compete exclusively in kayaking.

"There is something irreplaceable about the experience of sitting in a start gate, hearing the countdown '3, 2, 1 Go!'" Heyl said. "There are many technical examples of how skiing helped my kayaking, but even combined they do not match the importance of those hundreds of skiing starts. By the time I was eighteen, '3, 2, 1' had become my mental trigger to focus," he said.

"Brett worked super hard," said Julius, Head U16 Coach at GMVS. "He was a great kid, intense, and he rose above the pressure he was under."

After GMVS, Heyl made the US National Canoe/Kayak Team and moved to Washington, DC to train with the team coach and attend George Washington University. He trained for four years, working with his coach two to three times per day. He admits it was hard to strike a balance between training and school, but he was training with a purpose; the goal was the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece.

Four Americans made it to the final qualifying round, which was a World Cup on the Athens Olympic course. To stay in contention, Heyl needed to be in the top ten. After his first run, he didn't think he would make it, but as he watched the remaining racers, he stared in disbelief. The moment came when there were not enough people left to knock him out of the top ten. "I was going to the Olympics!" he said. "Calling my parents to tell them was one of the sweetest moments of my life. They had sacrificed so much for my athletic success; it was wonderful to be able to give them that moment," he said.

Heyl remembers the opening ceremonies of the Olympics as "unimaginable." Although the competition did not go as well as he wanted (he placed 15th), he said he made good friends from other sports, and it was the experience of a lifetime.

## 2008—LONDON OR BUST

In 2008, Heyl was one of the best paddlers in the world. "I had succeeded in my goal of the past four years of being brutally honest about the areas in which I was lacking, and forcing myself to get better and train harder," he said.

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Brett Heyl, Class of 2000



But one bad run in the qualifying competition, and Heyl's dream of London was shattered. "I had one bad run at the worst possible time, and in a blink it was over."

That defeat nearly broke his spirit. "It was crushing," he said. "But over the past four years, I have learned that if I can bounce back from that place, then I can handle any disappointment. Overcoming that fear of failure has been great for me as a person,"

To Heyl's credit, in addition to being an Olympian, is also a four time US National Champion, three time Pan-Am Champion, and placed second in the 2008 World Cup Overall.

## A PUBLIC SERVICE PATH

After returning from England and taking a brief break, Heyl received an offer to work for the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, NC. He began assisting the team that was running the stadium event of the Convention (due to severe weather this event was cancelled). "It was an amazing team, and we worked very well together," Heyl said. "My boss had been the First Lady's trip director before being asked to run the stadium event for the President's campaign," he said.

After the convention, Heyl began doing advance work for President Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and former President Bill Clinton. "Advance is an interesting world in which a small group of us would go ahead of a principal and plan, create, and execute the event," he said. He credits his training as an athlete to his success in advance work. "You have to be able to self-motivate and work hard. Also, when we are creating venues, the visualization skills learned by being an athlete were indispensable."

Heyl was honored to work on the most recent inauguration for President Obama. He was part of a small team working for the Swearing-in Ceremony. "It was a wonderful experience, and one that put me between the President's wishes and those of Congress (who constitutionally run the inauguration). It was eye-opening to say the least!"

Although his work on the advance team has come to a close, and Heyl will move on to other pursuits, he feels that GMVS solidified the tenacity he has to stick to his goals and to weather the storms on his route to success. "GMVS is an interesting dynamic in which students are both friends and competitors," he said. "It is a conflict that doesn't get the attention that I feel it deserves. However, it prepared me for the exact same dynamic I encountered in my ten years on the US National Team," he said.

His advice to current students is to, "Become best friends with your dream. It is what will carry you over the long journey." He admits that dreams are worthless without goals you can control and attain. "If you can map your way from where you are now to your dream with goals, then there is nothing standing in your way," he said. "But goals are often hard to achieve, and not always fun. It is your dream that will push you through the hard times, and allow you to keep moving forward."

*Kim Reynolds is a writer and editor who lives in Warren, Vermont. Two of her children are currently students at GMVS.*