

Graduation 2007 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Karen Pickering

Orator: Dr Martin Sellens

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred on KAREN PICKERING (MBE).

Senate has not arrived at this resolution lightly. A University of Essex degree has to be earned, as this year's graduands know only too well. Indeed, those of you who are graduating today might feel a little put out that you have had to work hard for years to earn the right to wear the University's splendid regalia, whereas a simple resolution of Senate has given the same right to Karen Pickering. But let me explain to you how she has earned this accolade, in case you are not already familiar with her exceptional achievements as a swimmer.

Karen Pickering represented her country at a senior level for twenty years, between 1986 and 2005 when she finally retired at the grand old age (for competitive swimmers) of thirty-three. During her international career she won more major championship medals for Britain than any other female swimmer and won more Commonwealth medals for England than any female athlete in any sport, ever. She was also the first British female swimmer to win a World Championship title when she took gold in the two hundred metres freestyle way back in 1993.

Her achievements in the sport make impressive reading.

- She won seventy-three titles on the national and international stage, including eight World Championship, fourteen European Championship and thirteen Commonwealth Games medals.
- She competed in four Olympic Games, getting to five finals.
- She twice set world records for the two hundred metre freestyle relay (in 2000 and 2001, with some friends).
- She has thirty-eight British Championship titles and has held the British record for the two hundred metre freestyle (completing the two hundred metres in under two minutes. You might want to try that sometime...).
- In the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester she won two golds and one silver medal in front of her home crowd; a career highlight which was recognised when she was given the honour of carrying the English flag at the Closing Ceremony.
- She was awarded the MBE for services to swimming in 1994 (at which point of course, she had barely got started!).

What makes this list of achievements even more remarkable is that they were accumulated despite a career-threatening fracture of the spine sustained in a car accident in 1996. To remain at the top of a demanding sport such as swimming for more than twenty years is quite amazing and requires a level of dedication that few of us can imagine, let alone emulate. The training programme of even a club level swimmer is enormously gruelling, involving antisocial hours to get access to facilities and multiple daily training sessions to develop and sustain that elusive "feel" for the water. So Karen Pickering has certainly earned her right to be considered one of the best ever British swimmers. However, although this might be good enough for the Queen (for her MBE) it doesn't quite cut it for an honorary degree at the University of Essex.

The guidelines for this award encourage nominations of prominent sports figures but only if, in addition to their achievements in sport, they have made a significant contribution to the sports industry or to sports education. Karen Pickering has rather cleverly ticked both of these boxes by founding the Karen Pickering Swim School that already has branches in six towns across the South East, from Norwich to Brighton even though it was only founded last year. These schools will help ensure continuity in swimming excellence, as well as contributing to the exercise for health agenda. Karen clearly believes in starting them young as the schools offer classes called “from bump to baby swim”, but I’m not sure if she actually encourages the transition from bump to baby during training sessions!

One of her clients has written on her web site “Karen is a great teacher and is more than happy to dive in herself to show us what we should be doing”. Clearly Karen leads by example, and she is widely looked up to as a role model by those she has trained with (including some of our own Sports Science students) and those she touches as a teacher and coach. Her continued support for Team Ipswich Swimming, her club for about twenty years, has helped them become one of the premier swimming clubs in England (they recently achieved seventh place in the Speedo League Cup Final). Her hands-on approach is also evident in her charity work. Karen started the Cancer Research UK “Race for Life” five kilometres run for women at the University a couple of years ago. However, unlike most celebrity race starters, she sprinted off at the gun and finished in, I think it was, fourth or fifth place. We are looking forward to a repeat performance when she starts the event here again in a couple of weeks time. She has also been involved in the charity Comrades of Children Overseas (COCO for short) that Steve Cram helped to set up nine years ago and has taken part in a number of fund raising events for them.

Her support for the University has included opening the University’s cardiac rehabilitation clinic, the Phoenix Club, and a memorable appearance as Guest Speaker at the University’s Annual Sports Award Dinner, both of these happening in 2004. In fact she was at the University only a couple of weeks ago encouraging sports-mad year ten pupils to follow their dreams both as athletes and students of Sport. She is an inspirational and motivational speaker - well, we will find out for ourselves in a few minutes. She is tireless in her promotion of sport both locally, as an Ambassador for Sport for Ipswich and nationally. She played a major role in the team that won the 2012 Olympics for London, sits on the Sport England Regional Sports Board, and the British Olympic Association Board and is Chairman of the Olympic Committee for the British Athlete’s Commission. Three years ago she founded the “Splash” awards that are presented annually to recognise and celebrate the achievements of elite swimmers, both able bodied & disabled.

What’s more, she has lived locally, albeit in Ipswich, which is the wrong side of the river Stour, for most of her life. Given the University’s new partnership with University Campus Suffolk in Ipswich, I think we can reasonably consider our neighbouring town to be no more really than a far-flung suburb of Colchester. In my opinion, that makes Karen an honorary Essex Girl.

With such impressive credentials, who could possibly deny that Karen Pickering is a most worthy recipient of a University of Essex Honorary Degree?

Chancellor, I present to you Karen Pickering.