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ALICIA COUTTS & DAVID URQUHART

Swimmer Alicia Coutts will represent Australia at the 2012 London Olympics. The 24-year-old, who lost her dad to non-Hodgkin lymphoma at the age of seven, says she would not have known such success if it weren't for her former coach David Urquhart, 63.

ALICIA: I met David when I was nine. He was my swim coach [at Brisbane's Cleveland Aquatic Centre]. Dave knew I had lost my dad and I think he looked out for me that little bit more. He has been like my surrogate father ever since. Dad would have really liked Dave. It's a shame they never got to meet. Dad died on November 19, 1994, at 10.20am. I was sitting in the lounge room playing with my teddies when my brother [Bradley, then 8] came running to me, crying. He said, "Daddy's dead." Dad was lying in his bed and I remember staring at him, not believing it – I was too young to understand the concept of losing someone. I had my first swimming carnival that afternoon. Mum told me I did not have to go, but I said, "I have to swim for Dad." I won every race.

Dad said to me when I was six he thought I would go to the Olympics. At first, I think I pursued the sport for him, but then Dave said I needed to do it for myself. As a coach, he was always there to guide me. You'd never meet a nicer person than him. As a sole parent, Mum was facing real financial hardship and Dave never once asked Mum to pay for my lessons.

I definitely wouldn't have achieved as much in swimming without Dave always trying to get the best out of me. He is not a yelling kind of coach. He's a genuinely loving person. As a young

swimmer, I used to get so nervous I'd vomit before a race. He taught me to believe in myself. He also told me I needed more mongrel in me.

David coached me from the age of nine to 13, and then his son Chris coached me. When I turned 18, I moved away to the AIS. It was hard for me to say goodbye to him but I knew I had to work on trying to be tougher. Honestly, I probably didn't get tough until I had my surgery in 2007. I was diagnosed with intussusception of the bowel and had 10 centimetres of my bowel removed. They also found a tumour, which, thankfully, was benign. During that time, I spoke to David a lot. He'd helped secure a scholarship for me at the AIS and I was worried my health scare would jeopardise that. David spoke to the AIS and got reassurance it wouldn't.

Even though Dave has retired from coaching, he's still very active in the swimming fraternity. He is president of Swimming Australia, so I see him at all the swim meets. I see him more than I see Mum. At nationals, I look up and I can see him and my mum in the stands and it makes me feel happy. Mum thinks he's the bee's knees!

Dave is going to the [London] Olympics and it will be nice to have him there. He is a very important person in my life. Dave doesn't know it yet, but one day, when I get married [to schoolteacher boyfriend Steve Hardy, 30], I want

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him to walk me down the aisle. I'm sure he will be happy when he hears that.

DAVID: Alicia was seven when she joined our junior squads. From the first time I saw her in the water, I could see she was blessed with natural ability. I knew Alicia's dad had only just passed away because her mother, Julie [now 53], had told me. I probably unconsciously tucked her under my wing a bit more because of her circumstances. Her story is a touching one, but it's not something you could dwell on all the time, as it's something she has to live with.

Alicia was very bubbly but also a very shy little girl. She always looked for her mother to be around her. She was very unassuming and she never talked back to me. Our relationship took a while to develop, but I think it grew as she gained confidence. The bond got stronger as she got older and I helped her in whatever way I could, like getting her sponsorship, which relieved the pressure on Julie. I also gave Julie work at the pool, and we started to see Alicia and her family socially. They'd be at our house for barbecues and the bond became deeper. I remember, all of a sudden, Alicia started to see me as the male in her life that she could look up to. I never set out to replace her dad, but I was very conscious of being a positive influence.

When you talk about the relationship between a coach and an athlete, the best relationships form out of respect. And when there's respect and trust, you naturally become a sort of father figure.

I really had to advocate for Alicia to get her into the AIS. At that stage, my two sons [Chris and Gavin] were doing most of the coaching and I was mentoring them. When I lost the lease on the 50-metre pool, I realised we had to say goodbye to her, which was difficult as it meant I was taking a great coaching opportunity away from my sons. Luckily, they agreed it was the right thing to do for Alicia.

I do regard Alicia as family. She became the daughter I didn't have. At the [2010] Commonwealth Games in Delhi I had tears rolling down my cheeks when I saw this little girl who meant so much to me win five gold medals! Alicia still phones me up if she has a problem. She was very lonely when she went to the AIS. She was also immature, so when she went through what she did with her health, she toughened up a bit more. Her mum didn't really want her to go but I talked Alicia into going and assured her everything would be okay. Did I feel responsible? That's an understatement. If things had gone belly up, I would have felt terrible, but I just knew it was make-or-break time for her.

All the people who have coached Alicia have been very good for her, but she was still swimming below her potential until 2008, when she met her boyfriend. Now she's happy and content and finding that inner happiness has been the turning point to her success.

Alicia is a very talented, sweet, innocent young girl whom I feel privileged to have helped along the way. I will shed another tear when I see her swim in London. She's in with a chance, my word. She's swimming the 200-metre individual medley and the 100-metre fly, and she's a chance for the 4 x 100-metre freestyle relay, too. I will give her an extra cuddle when I see her.

What does she mean to me? That's the hardest question in the world. I'd go to any extent to help her out. I think it's very touching that she wants me to walk her down the aisle one day. It's a lovely honour ... you have no idea. **GW**