

Lesson 5 Rise Above Challenges

A Journey From War to the Olympics

When Yusra Mardini was a young girl growing up in Damascus, Syria, her life centered around swimming. Her father was a former professional swimmer, and she started learning how to swim from a young age. When she was nine years old, she was already faster than many older swimmers. It was clear that she had a special talent, and she fell in love with the sport. She enjoyed watching Olympic swimming events with her father, which led her to dream about competing in the Olympics. She got the chance to represent Syria in an international swimming championship, and it seemed like her Olympic dream might someday come true.

However, Yusra had no idea that her life would soon be turned upside down by the horrors of the Syrian civil war, which had broken out in 2011. Over the next few years, normal activities like going to school became risky. Through all of this chaos, she clung to her dream and kept swimming. However, even this became dangerous. One fateful day, a bomb fell in the pool where she was training. Although it did not explode, this incident was horrifying enough to be a wake-up call for Yusra and her sister Sara. They realized that they could no longer stay in their home country, and they made up their minds to flee Syria and go to Germany to avoid the war. If they reached Europe, the rest of the family would follow. The decision was not an easy one, but Yusra knew that it was her only option if she wanted to pursue her dream and live without fear.

In August, 2015, the sisters began their dangerous journey by making their way to their first destination, Türkiye. There, along with 18 other people, including children and babies, they boarded a tiny boat designed for seven passengers. They were heading across the sea towards Greece when disaster struck. The boat's engine failed in the middle of the open sea, and the weather rapidly grew worse. The heavy boat began to sink, and the panicked, desperate passengers had no choice but to throw their possessions into the sea. Yusra felt heartbroken as she watched people's treasured belongings disappear under the waves. However, she had no time to reflect. She had to take action immediately in order to save herself and the other passengers. She jumped into the water along with Sara and two others, and the four of them guided the drifting boat. They swam for three and a half hours until they arrived safely with all the other passengers on the shore of a Greek island.

Next, Yusra and Sara had to travel through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria. They walked great distances, and even though they caught rides in small cars and crowded buses from time to time, they had to cross every border on foot. No matter how exhausted they were, they kept moving. At the end of this overwhelming 25-day journey, they finally made it to Germany and settled at a refugee center in Berlin. Despite all the hardships and adversities she underwent, Yusra's passion for swimming never left her. In fact, it was the only thing she could do to feel at home in this foreign land.

She decided to take up training again, and she started looking for a coach in Berlin who could help her reach her full potential. She eventually met Sven Spannekrebs at a swimming club near the refugee center and asked if he could be her coach. When he saw her swim, he immediately recognized her outstanding talent and agreed to do so. Sven helped Yusra stay focused and persistent in her efforts to pursue excellence. Following his instructions, Yusra trained hard day and night, hoping her efforts would pay off one day.

Yusra soon received a chance to make her dream a reality when she was invited to join the first ever refugee team at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Although it seemed like a great opportunity, Yusra was hesitant. If she joined the refugee team, she thought, people might view her with pity instead of seeing her as a serious athlete. She almost turned down the invitation, but she decided to accept it after she realized that she could inspire hope in millions of other refugees facing similar challenges.

At the Games, Yusra competed in both the 100-meter butterfly and the 100-meter freestyle events. When she stepped onto the starting blocks, she was determined to pour everything she had into the competition. She came in 41st out of 45 competitors in the butterfly event and 45th out of 46 in the freestyle event. Even though she left the Olympics without a medal, she was proud to have made history alongside her teammates. The time on the scoreboard did not matter. In one interview, when a reporter asked if she could make a statement, she remarked, "I want everyone to stay strong for their goals in life, because if you have your goals in front of your eyes, you will do everything you can; and I think even if I fail, I will try again. ... I want to show everybody that it's hard to arrive at your dreams, but it's not impossible. You can do it; everyone can do it."