

Rachael Flatt, MA, Olympian

Clinical Psychology Doctoral Candidate,

**The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, EDGI research assistant &
US Ladies' National Champion & Olympic figure skater, *NORTH CAROLINA***

Rachael Flatt is a doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology program, University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill under the mentorship of Distinguished Professor of Eating Disorders, Founding Director of the UNC Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders, and Principal Investigator of the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI), Cynthia Bulik, PhD, FAED.

Ms Flatt's long-term interests include furthering eating disorder research and digital mental health technology through program optimization and tailored treatments for high-risk and under-served populations, including athletes.



She graduated from Stanford University in June 2015 with a BS in biology and a minor in psychology. She completed her MA in clinical psychology at UNC in 2020.

Prior to forging an academic career, Ms Flatt was a highly esteemed Olympian who placed seventh in the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in ladies' figure skating. She was also crowned the 2010 US National Champion, and the 2008 World Junior Ladies' Figure Skating Champion.

Although she retired from competitive skating in 2014, Ms Flatt continues to play an active role in the national sports community, as an athlete representative for the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee's Mental Health Task Force, US Figure Skating's Board of Directors, and as US Figure Skating's Chair of the Athletes Advisory Committee, among various other positions.

During her professional sporting career, Ms Flatt witnessed first-hand the pressure her skating peers experienced to conform to the perceived "ideal body" standard of the sport. Today, armed with this knowledge, she is supporting Prof Bulik with EDGI – the world's largest genetic research study of eating disorders ever performed, that aims to identify the hundreds of genes that influence a person's risk of developing anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder, to improve treatment, and ultimately, save lives.

This is Ms Flatt's story.

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"I've been fortunate enough to merge my passions for eating disorder research and athlete mental health through my research and clinical work," said Ms Flatt.

According to Ms Flatt, growing up in the figure skating world was transformative for many reasons, noting the aesthetic nature of the sport lends itself to an unhealthy focus on physique, a gruelling training regimen, and eating habits.

"In aesthetic sports like figure skating, which emphasize leanness and have a judged component to scoring (e.g., figure skating, diving, gymnastics), the eating disorder prevalence for elite athletes may be as high as 30 per cent.

"These pressures are often reinforced by judges, parents, and peers. Many disordered eating behaviors like restricted eating and excessive exercise are normalized when they're in service of achieving athletic success," Ms Flatt said.

Ms Flatt describes her parents as being crucial pillars to her support network, without whose support she may have easily succumbed to an eating disorder.

"My mom was a very strong advocate for my overall health and well-being since she was typically at the rink with me. It was a tremendous challenge for both of us to hold our ground given I didn't look like the other elite skaters who were much thinner and/or more toned," said Ms Flatt.

Over the years, Ms Flatt received substantial negative commentary about her weight and shape due to her unconventional physique, despite being the most consistent US athlete at the time, and the top internationally ranked US athlete.

Her parents nonetheless ensured she always felt strong and healthy, and continuously emphasized that the biggest priority was her health and happiness.

"When watching videos of myself completing, I look strong and healthy, and I couldn't imagine telling an adolescent with the same physique, that they needed to drop any weight or change their diet.

"I always knew that after I retired, I would want to contribute to a cultural change in skating and in other sports to prevent eating disorders in athletes, and to improve education around, and resources for, mental health concerns," Ms Flatt said.

Commenting on preliminary UNC anorexia nervosa research that compared 17,000 participants with more than 55,000 controls from 17 countries, and subsequently identified both psychiatric and metabolic origins to anorexia nervosa, along with eight genetic variants significantly associated with anorexia nervosa, Ms Flatt explained:

"The Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) was a landmark study for reconceptualizing the disorder, and demonstrated both genetic associations with psychiatric disorders, and metabolism in anorexia nervosa. EDGI has the potential to similarly shape our understanding of other eating disorders.

“As an EDGI research assistant, and as an EDGI ambassador, it is both a pleasure and an honor to be involved with an international research study that presents a tremendous opportunity to take a huge step forward in understanding, diagnosing and treating eating disorders,” said Ms Flatt.

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