

Local Olympians meet the president

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Manteo Mitchell, center, is applauded by fellow athletes after being acknowledged by President Barack Obama during a ceremony welcoming the 2012 U.S. Olympic and Paralympic teams to the White House on Friday. / Pablo Martinez/Monsivais/AP

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Read more about Lauren Tamayo's White House visit on the Girls Gone Outdoors blog at CITIZEN-TIMES.com.

ASHEVILLE — Manteo Mitchell received the surprise of his life on Friday as he, Lauren Tamayo and other members of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic teams were honored at the White House.

President Barack Obama made general remarks during the ceremony before he started to single out several individuals who inspired him during the London Olympics, including Mitchell, the former standout from Western Carolina University.

“And then there’s Manteo Mitchell. Where is he?” the president asked. “Now, this has to be one of my favorite stories of the whole Olympics — breaks his shin bone halfway through his lap on the 4 x 400 meter relay, but he finishes anyway in 46 seconds and helps the U.S. qualify for the final.”

Mitchell said he was shocked when the commander in chief called him out.

“I nervously raised my hand and people just went crazy,” he said.

“He talked about what happened in the race and I received an amazing ovation from not only the crowd and media on hand, but my own teammates from the entire team USA roster.”

Tamayo, the Asheville track cyclist who helped the women’s pursuit team win a silver medal, got to hug Obama, his wife Michelle and Vice President Joe Biden.

“It was very memorable,” Tamayo said.

Mitchell ran the first leg of the relay during the preliminaries in England last month and broke his left fibula. He finished his lap, which enabled the Americans to remain in the race and qualify for the finals. The next day, the U.S. team finished second to win a silver medal.

Mitchell shared a special moment with Michelle Obama, who briefly held hands with him.

“I had a personal conversation and picture with the Obamas and Joe Biden,” he said. “Michelle was almost in tears carrying on the conversation with me and grabbed my hand and wanted a family picture. She walked me over to where they were and that’s when President Obama gave me the handshake of my life and a hug and told me how proud of me he was.”

Meeting Obamas

Tamayo, who had never been to the White House before Friday, said she was standing about 10 feet behind the president during the ceremony.

“After the speeches — all three said they would take time with us and not rush off to their next appointment,” said said. “I got to shake hands with them and gave them each a hug. I told Michelle I was from North Carolina, and she asked where, and I said ‘Asheville,’ and she mentioned that she loved Asheville and loved to vacation in Asheville, so that was cool, to have that connection with them.”

As for Barack Obama, Tamayo said, “The president’s demeanor was really personable — he’s very friendly. He was more excited to have us there than maybe the athletes were at being at the White House. He said ‘I don’t care what’s on my agenda, I’m going to take the time to spend with all of you.’”

Citizen-Times reporter Karen Chávez contributed to this story.