

Graduation 2013
Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Laura Trott
Orator: Professor Chris Cooper

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Laura Trott

In 1992 as part of my Medical Research Council Fellowship in the Paediatric Department at University College, I studied the health of babies born prematurely in special care baby units. I marvelled at the resistance and strength of the human spirit, both of the children and parents, coping with such adversity. Little did I know that up the road in Harlow, Essex, a baby was born one month prematurely who would more than emphasise this spirit and endurance.

Laura Trott was born with a collapsed lung, leading to a six-week stay in intensive care. Later diagnosed with asthma she was recommended by doctors to take up sport to help regulate her breathing. Trampolining was one of her early loves, but she had to give this up after a blackout forced her to stop. Trampolining's loss was cycling's gain. The Trott family originally took up cycling to help their mother lose weight. These health benefits soon turned into a love of the sport, and both Laura and her older sister Emma became elite cyclists. Her father was also an inspiration. As Laura said in a recent interview "My Dad is properly mad about the sport and seems to have an answer for everything". As a father of a daughter about the same age as you Laura, I can reveal that my daughter often says that I am mad about sport and have an answer to everything. But, unlike you, she is not being complementary when she says it.

Laura grew up in Cheshunt in Hertfordshire, where she attended Turnford School. At the age of 11, she came third in the Boys and Girls Omnium at the British National Track Championships a feat she repeated when she was 16 in 2008, when she came third in the Junior sprint category. Actually finishing third in these British championships is not such a bad place to be. A quick look at the bronze medallists reveals names such as Chris Hoy, Bradley Wiggins and Jason Kenny. Or rather, as we should now say, Sir Chris Hoy, Sir Bradley Wiggins and - Jason Kenny. Arguably Laura's rise to success from these championships was even more meteoric than these other luminaries. These bronze medals were the start of a road that would culminate last year in a Velodrome in a certain Olympic park 45 minutes down the train line from us here in Colchester, of which more later.

In 2010 Laura was part of the winning British team pursuit trio at the European Championships. She followed this up in 2011 with wins at the Under 23 European championships in the Individual pursuit, scratch race and the team pursuit. In the same year she again won the team pursuit at the European Senior Championships – as well as the Omnium.

These successes were just the tasters for 2012. In April last year, Laura won gold on the team pursuit and the omnium in the World Cycling Championships in Melbourne, Australia. She competed in these same events in the London 2012 Olympics. First came the Team Pursuit, where, along with Joanna Rowsell and Dani King, Laura won gold in a world record time. In fact, that Olympic Gold-medal ride was a culmination of six successive rides in that trio that each, in turn, broke the world record.

For those of you who don't know, the Omnium is cyclist's multi-event equivalent of track and field's heptathlon, making Laura the cycling equivalent of Jessica Ennis. The events in the Omnium are the Flying lap, the elimination race, the individual pursuit, the scratch race and the points race. Like

most of us watching Team GB last year I became an overnight expert in cycling, whether it is be the exact speed of that funny little motorbike (or Durney) that leads out the Keirin to the precise time to pounce off the bend in a sprint. But the points race? What's that all about? A lot of cyclists go round in circles and then one of them is declared a winner. I had no idea what was going on. So I was pleased one of Laura's recent tweets that simply said: "*Absolutely carnage points race tonight. Just glad I stayed upright!*". Still there came a flash of inspiration when I was watching the Omnium at the Olympics. A voice in my head said "Don't worry about understanding what's going on. This is Laura Trott. She won't let us down. And of course she didn't, duly winning her second Olympic gold medal for team GB in the Omnium.

I have made these victories seem like an easy path to success. Let me assure you, they are not. As well as managing her asthma through the grueling training sessions and competition races, Laura has had to overcome an additional health problem that often results in her being physically sick after races.

Still, Laura would be the first to admit – that as well as her parents – there are many other people responsible for her success. One of the features of the heady sporting days of last summer was the long list of names our Olympic medalists recited when asked to comment on how they had achieved success. Laura is part of the phenomenally successful UK cycling track team based in Manchester and led by Sir Dave Brailsford. Success at the elite level no longer relies on a lone coach to help an athlete; there is an extensive support team of performance analysts, physiologists, biomechanists, nutritionists and psychologists. Today, as well a Laura, we are awarding degrees to many University of Essex sports science undergraduate and postgraduate research students who train in these same areas. Our Human Performance Unit (HPU) at Essex tests and supports athletes, both ordinary and elite, and we are fortunate today that Laura honoured the HPU with a visit. Some of the work of the HPU is at the experimental research stage, with the ultimate aim of designing new ways to improve the performance of athletes, from speed skaters to hockey players, rugby players and triathletes, including of course those who, like Laura may one contribute so to the success of Team GB.

Today Laura will become a member of our academic community. The future for our new Essex doctor is bright. Laura has moved on from her London 2012 success, winning gold at the team pursuit and silver in the Omnium at this year's World Championships. She is committed to repeating her Olympic success at Rio in 2016. She is still only 21. Rumour has it that she might have the long-term aim of eclipsing Sir Chris Hoy as the country's most successful ever Olympian. Laura has also joined the women's road racing team sponsored by the current Tour de France winner Sir Bradley Wiggins. A women's version of the Tour de France is long overdue. Perhaps its first winner could be a University of Essex doctor?

Chancellor, I present to you, Laura Trott.