

Rings and buzz: Olympian generating excitement at UIL swim meet Granbury's Vollmer first gold-medal winner to compete at state

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By MATT JACOB / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN - From her perch high in the upper deck Friday, Glenna Bollen could only hope her daughter, Molly, would hear the repeated words of encouragement.

"Stay with Dana," Mrs. Bollen shouted. "Stay with Dana."

Two lanes over from Molly, 2004 Olympic gold medalist Dana Vollmer pulled to the lead of her preliminary heat in the 100-yard butterfly at the University Interscholastic League state swimming and diving meet.



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Granbury Olympian Dana Vollmer (right) talks to 2001 Goodwill Games teammate Alexi Spann of Austin Bowie High School.

It's not every year that an Olympic champion swims in a high school state meet; it's a first for Texas, Peter Contreras of the UIL said. Vollmer's presence, while imposing, has generated only excitement, not resentment, from her competition at the Lee and Joe Jamail Texas Swimming Center.

"She's eligible and has fulfilled all her requirements, so why shouldn't she get the chance to swim here?" Plano West coach Greg Fisher said. "It brings some publicity to our sport, and some people to come watch that we otherwise might not get.

"She certainly has a leg up, but swimmers want to go against the best they can. If that means going against Dana, that's just part of it I guess."

Vollmer, a Granbury senior and member of the United States' 800-meter freestyle relay that set a world record in Athens in August, is competing in her first state meet after being home-schooled the last two years. She wants to swim in college next year and can choose from Stanford, Southern Cal, California, Tennessee and Florida.

Friday wasn't the first time Molly Bollen, a junior at Carrollton Newman Smith, has raced against Vollmer. In December, the two met in the finals of the 50-yard butterfly at the Kerr-McGee Elite Swim Meet in Oklahoma. Vollmer won that race, and Bollen came in third.

Vollmer was in lane four for her butterfly preliminary race Friday, Bollen in lane six. From atop the starting blocks, Bollen glanced to her right and left to survey the field - keenly aware of where Vollmer's presence.

As she came up for a breath every few strokes, Bollen kept a watchful eye on the Olympian. Vollmer finished first, as expected, with a time of 54.27 seconds - .02 off the Class 5A state-meet record. But Bollen was right behind her - in a time of 55.56 - to finish second in the heat and earn a spot alongside Vollmer for Saturday morning's final.

Though she acknowledges competing against someone of Vollmer's caliber can be nerve-racking, Bollen said it is imperative not to get caught up in the excitement of the moment.

"It's not like no one has seen her before and that she's come out of the blue," Bollen said. "Dana's a great person to swim against because she brings out the best in everyone who's in the water with her."

Humble Kingwood junior Melissa Hain met Vollmer for the first time before Friday's 200 freestyle preliminary, which Vollmer won by almost two seconds in 1:49.69.

"You could tell right away she's a really nice girl," said Hain, who finished fourth in the heat. "She didn't throw it in anyone's face that she made the Olympics or anything. You have to just swim your own race and not think about it or else you psyche yourself out of the race before it even begins."

It's hard to ignore Vollmer, and not just because she stands a shade over 6-feet tall. The 17-year-old is ranked among the world's top 15 in the 200 freestyle and 100 butterfly. And that white tape visible on the small of her back? Per UIL rules, it covered the small tattoo on her back depicting the Olympic rings.

Vollmer is the top seed in her two individual events entering Saturday morning's finals, when she will don her knee-length fast skin suit as she goes after state and national high school records.

She's already set one state record - her 22.97-second leadoff leg of Granbury's 200 freestyle relay established a new mark in the 50 freestyle. But her effort couldn't qualify the team for Saturday's final.

Unlike other swimmers, Vollmer has not decreased her workouts to peak for the state meet. She's in the middle of training with the Fort Worth Area Swim Team for the World Championship Trials in April.

"Now that we're at state, I really want to do good and go after it [record swims]," Vollmer said. "It shows me how much more hard work I have to do before Trials."

E-mail mjacob@dallasnews.com



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This small tattoo on Dana Vollmer's back, depicting the Olympic rings, must be covered up while swimming in UIL events.