

Vollmer joins long list of Olympians as Florida Gator

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by RICK MAUCH

Dana Vollmer dreamed of swimming for Stanford University. Until she visited the University of Florida.

"I called my parents from there and said, 'I'm going.' I came home and started throwing things in boxes," said the Olympic gold medalist.

"That's the one school I visited where I didn't have any doubt that I'd get better. My last 50 (yards/meters) is the strongest part of my race, and at Florida they specialize in distance racing."

Vollmer, who graduated Granbury High School Tuesday, visited Stanford, Southern Cal and California (in Berkeley) along with Florida. She was scheduled to visit Tennessee but canceled when they had a coaching change.

Ever since Vollmer won a gold medal and helped set a world record of 7:53.42 on the 800-meter relay in the 2004 Olympics in Athens, speculation has been that she was going to Stanford. The Olympic team was coached by then-Stanford coach Richard Quick.

But Quick, who coached in six Olympics and won 12 NCAA titles in 29 seasons, the last 17 with Stanford, announced his retirement. Naturally, Vollmer was disappointed at the decision, but she said it didn't factor into her decision to head south.

"Actually, I feel that even if [coach Quick] were there I'd choose Florida," Vollmer said. "It's just more me. I felt at home there instantly."

"I just have a gut feeling."

Vollmer might be getting that feeling because there is a Fort Worth-area connection to the Gator program. The coach, Gregg Troy, is a 1972 TCU graduate, and strength/training coach Karin Werth is a former member of the Fort Worth Swim Team.

Also, Matt Greene, a 2004 GHS graduate and former state qualifier in swimming, is attending Florida, not swimming but working on an engineering degree.

"His house is across the street from where I'll be living," Vollmer said. "It was great to see him again and to know he'll be that close."

Vollmer is close friends with Matt's younger sister Carrie Greene, a sophomore who has qualified for state twice. Carrie swam on the 200-yard freestyle relay at state with Dana last season.

Vollmer was named the top swimmer in the state at that meet. She set records in winning the 200 free (1:45.64) and the 100 butterfly (52.70), along with posting a state-record time of 22.93 to lead off the 200 free relay.

In fact, Vollmer's time at state is already faster than the graduating Lady Gator swimmer she should be replacing on Florida's 800-yard relay. That squad set the NCAA record last season with a time of 7:00.25.

"Dana is the highest profile American athlete in the country, and is by far the biggest recruit that Florida has landed since we signed Dara Torres (1985-89)," Troy said. "She is a tremendous athlete, and I know she will make an immediate impact on our team."

Torres, by the way, was the first American to swim in four Olympics.

Vollmer has said she has her sights set on five. She qualified for her first at age 16 after being the youngest ever to compete in the Olympic Trials four years earlier at age 12.

In addition to swimming on the record-setting relay, Vollmer finished sixth in the 200 free in Athens.

Vollmer is the latest in a long line of Olympians to attend Florida. Swimmers from the school have won 64 Olympic medals, including 33 gold—and that is not counting Vollmer's.

Florida has had 79 of its swimmers represent 21 nations in the Olympics. A Florida swimmer has won at least one medal in every Olympics since 1968.

During his coaching career, Troy has worked with 49 Olympians.

Vollmer will be one of six Olympians on the Florida roster next season. She will be joined by American senior Ryan Lachte, freshman Bradley Aly from Barbados, senior Vipa Bernhardt from Germany, sophomore Darian Townsend from South Africa, and sophomore J.B. Walsh from the Philippines.

Townsend, like Vollmer, is part of a world-record-setting relay, having swum a leg of the South African 400 free relay in Athens.

Florida was third nationally last season behind Southeast Conference foes national champion Georgia and Auburn, which spent much of the season ranked No. 1 and won the SEC title.

Vollmer said going to Florida will bring about some changes, including events in which she competes. She may be adding the 500 free and the 200 individual medley to her repertoire.

"When I was talking to Stanford they wanted me to consider it (the 500) also," Vollmer said. "It's a lot longer than the 200, but I'm okay with it.

"I train with a lot of uptempo arm speed and not much leg, and that's good for the 500."

Vollmer said she also chose Florida for life after swimming.

"They have the second-most renowned forensics school in the nation," Vollmer said.

"Coach Troy is not only a TCU grad, but he spent a long time at Bolles Prep School (1977-97) in Florida," GHS swim coach Robert Laura said. "He sent many swimmers on to places like SMU, Stanford, with high grades. So parents and swimmers know they are going to get their education.

"He gets the right kind of students there. He strongly emphasizes academics."

Vollmer said she plans to move to Gainesville June 16. She will immediately begin training with the Gator program in preparation for the World University Games in Izmir, Turkey Aug. 11-21.

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