

U.S. swimmers focused on 'first-string' results at WUGs (7/5/2005)

BY MIKE WATKINS//Special Correspondent

Despite being some of the best young swimmers in the world – collegiate or otherwise – the members of this year's U.S. World University Games team feel somewhat under-appreciated as they prepare for the meet August 12-17 in Ismir, Turkey.



Nonetheless, these American swimmers are definitely proud to be competing on behalf of their home country – and intend to speed through the water and dispel any notions of there being two levels of U.S. swimmers.

"I would like the team to swim a thousand times better than we did at the last World University Games," said Justin Mortimer, a 13-time All-American for the University of Minnesota and a participant at the 2003 WUG in Korea. Mortimer will swim the 200, 400, 800 and 1500 freestyle events as well as the 800 freestyle relay.

"My goals are to win as many events as possible and to help show the world the strength of the 'second string' athletes from the United States."

Mortimer's WUG teammate, Dana Vollmer, agrees.

"I know that my teammates are training as hard as they possibly can, and this team may be thought of as the 'B' team, but we have decided to prove that wrong," said Vollmer, a recent high school graduate and 2004 gold-medallist on the world-record-setting 800m freestyle relay. In addition to swimming as a member of the 800 freestyle relay team, Vollmer will also compete for the United States in the 100 freestyle, 50 and 100 butterfly, and 400 medley and 400 freestyle relay events.

"I have never swum on the World University Games team but am very excited to do so and gain the experience that comes from every international competition," Vollmer said.

Jill Sterkel, co-head coach at the University of Texas and coach of the U.S. women's WUG team, has already noticed a commitment from all her swimmers and is expecting great things.

"The team really seemed to gel at our weekend camp in May, which I think will prove very important during the meet," Sterkel said. "Many of the women have international experience, and this team has character and attitude, and I look forward to helping them excel in Turkey."

As has been the case with past World University Games teams, this year's U.S. contingent was selected from their performances at World Championship Trials in April. And while they may have not been the fastest swimmers at the Trials (first- and second-place finishers were selected for World Championships), each member is a tested veteran, either nationally or internationally.

Megan (Quann) Jendrick, who made the 2000 Sydney Olympic team and swam to gold medals in the 100m breaststroke and 400m medley relay, is one of those athletes. Now 21 and a student at Pacific Lutheran University in Washington, Quann,

who narrowly missed making her second Olympic team last summer, has a renewed vigilance for swimming and intends to make the most of it – starting with World University Games.

“I’m very glad to be back on the international stage,” Jendrick said. “I’ve changed quite a bit since Olympic Trials. I’m enjoying swimming more now than ever, which is fantastic given that at (Olympic) Trials, I wasn’t having fun at all.

“But now I’m back to having a great time training with a new team and training with my husband (Nathan), and I’m looking forward to some fast swims this summer at the World University Games.”

And even though Turkey is bordered to the southeast by Syria and Iraq and Iran to the east and is 99 percent Muslim, the members of the team aren’t concerned about safety.

Having competed at events throughout the world, they’ve seen the best and worst of attitudes about Americans and American athletes, and they are prepared for anything.

Ultimately, however, it comes down to swimming with speed and class. After all, Turkey’s foreign and domestic policy is “Peace at home, peace in the world.”

“As I see it, it’s our job to go over there and be outstanding representatives of our country, competing hard, competing fair and competing with class,” Sterkel added. “Our teams’ expectations are to represent the United States with all their heart, soul and passion in and out of the pool. We’ll swim our best, support each other and have fun.”

Jendrick agrees, stating there are other factors – like the competition and conditions – to focus on more than anti-American sentiment.

“I’m more concerned about the heat and buses without air conditioning than I am about people hating us,” said Jendrick, who will swim the 50, 100 and 200 breaststroke events, as well as the 400-medley relay. “We can pray for our safety and know the USOC is taking every precaution possible, and then we have to concentrate on swimming and representing America.”

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