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Granbury's Vollmer fights her way back

By CHARLES POLANSKY
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Two summers ago, Dana Vollmer was the toast of Tarrant County. Only 16, the Granbury resident was an Olympic swimming champion.

At the beginning of this summer, though, Vollmer was in danger of losing her spot among the nation's elite.

Injuries, old and new, pretty much put the kibosh on Vollmer's first college season at Florida. Her back was bothering her -- she has a degenerative disk and a bulging disk. Then an old shoulder injury flared up.

Homesickness set in.

"I knew going in that it was one of the harder-training teams, which at the time attracted me to them," Vollmer said. "When I got there, my body just couldn't handle what they did."

By the time Christmas rolled around, Vollmer needed a change of scenery.

In May, Vollmer transferred to Cal-Berkeley and began working out this summer with her club coach, Ron Forrest, who has coached Vollmer since 1999 and runs the Fort Worth Area Swim Team.

Forrest tried to help Vollmer regain her swagger.

"When you struggle over a period of time, it's easy to forget how good you really are," Forrest said. "You need reminding. That's what I tried to do, remind her how good she was, how good she is."

Even now, Vollmer's back isn't 100 percent. She said if she pushes too hard, she gets pain down her left leg and is barely able to walk. Vollmer, Forrest and the Texas doctors they've consulted since she returned from Florida hope that time, extensive rehabilitation and a few new workout wrinkles will help her back improve. Right now, surgery is not an option.

So far, things appear to be going swimmingly for Vollmer, who competed in the Pan Pacific Championships in Victoria, British Columbia, last weekend. Her best individual finish in the international meet was fifth in the 200 freestyle, and she was on the U.S.'s winning 800-freestyle relay team.

At the U.S. championships in early August, Vollmer finished third in the 200 freestyle, fourth in the 100 butterfly and reached consolation finals in the 50 and 100 freestyle. Her times were either career-bests or in line with career-bests.

"She's come a long way since May 1 when she came home," Forrest said. "But in swimming, there's just not the amount of rest time and down time for athletes that you'd need. It's not like she has six months or a year to walk away from the sport, heal herself and come back."

Not unless Vollmer wants to be forgotten, that is.

After sitting down with her parents and Forrest, Vollmer mapped out her summer plan. It was all geared toward going to nationals and doing well, which she did.

"That's what she drove herself toward all summer, getting up on the national stage and being a player, so to speak, since she kind of disappeared off the radar for a little while," Forrest said.

Vollmer knows her swimming is improving.

"I'm going faster than I ever have in practice," Vollmer said. "It's been really exciting to be swimming the times I'm swimming. By the times I'm going in practice, I'd like to say I'm back. But injury-wise, it depends day to day how I feel."

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