

Dana Vollmer: Snapping Back to Form (1/18/2007)



BY MIKE WATKINS//Special Correspondent

It's in Dana Vollmer's mental make-up to focus on the big picture and not sweat the little things. Rather than concentrate on what she hasn't done or didn't do, she's driven by the desire to see how good she can be.

So when she didn't make the U.S. World Championships team in 2005 (after winning a relay gold and setting a world record as a 16-year-old at the Athens Olympics), she turned her focus toward making the best of her opportunity to swim at the World University Games. She went on to win gold medals as a member of the 400-meter free and medley relays and silver in the 50m butterfly in Istanbul, Turkey.

Suffice it to say, it takes much more than a little disappointment to keep this rising star down and out. In fact, not reaching her goals just motivates her even more to make them realities.

"I'd hate to only scratch the surface of my own talent and be left wondering what I could have done," said Vollmer, who started swimming with her mother as a toddler and competed in her first meet at 4 years old. "This motivates me every day in practices and in life – to give 100 percent every day so I am left with no regrets."

Coming out of high school, Vollmer's name was at the top of the "most wanted" list among swim recruits across the country. After several visits, she chose the University of Florida and coach Gregg Troy.

But in her first season with the Gators, Vollmer battled injuries to her back and shoulder and failed to meet her own personal expectations – although she did place her name several times in the school and SEC record books.

It wasn't long before she knew she needed a change in scenery and a different approach to her training. In May 2006, she transferred to the University of California-Berkeley – one of her college finalists when she was a senior in high school – to work with Coach Teri McKeever.

"Teri's methods work for me," said Vollmer, who won a gold medal as a member of the 800m freestyle relay team at the 2006 Pan Pacific Championships in August and earned a spot on this year's World Championship team. "She focuses on the swimmers themselves and uses a wide variety of approaches to better our swimming abilities."

Now a sophomore and almost fully recovered from her freshman injuries, Vollmer has already made her mark for the No. 4-ranked Bears, most recently winning both butterfly events in Cal's 159-142 upset of second-ranked Arizona last weekend in Tucson. She was named the Pacific 10 Conference Swimmer of the Month for December after swimming five automatic NCAA qualifying times during the Georgia Invitational.

"Dana has been a great contribution to our team," said fellow World Championship and Cal-Berkeley team member Jessica Hardy. "She is a great racer who is willing to swim many different events, even if it's not her forte. She is very talented, so it is great for me and my teammates to be exposed to a high level of swimming."

With the 2006-2007 NCAA season nearing its end, Vollmer's focus will soon change to swimming for the United States at the FINA World Championships, March 17-April 1, in Melbourne, Australia.

Having swum in Australia before, she is definitely excited about performing in front of the "swim-hungry" fans Down Under.

"The Australian crowd is amazing. It's different than here in the United States because swimming in Australia is like football in the states," said Vollmer, who will swim the 200m freestyle and the 800m freestyle relay at Worlds. "Everyone knows who you are (in Australia). I like to have a big crowd. We are performing for entertainment as well, and it's way more rewarding to have a huge crowd."

Still just a teenager (she won't turn 20 until November), the Granbury, Texas native has big aspirations when it comes to swimming longevity. Having already medaled at the 2004 Games, she intends to swim beyond – WAY beyond – the 2008 Beijing Games if her body and desire remain strong.

"My long-term goals for swimming are to make five Olympic teams," Vollmer said emphatically. "I started young. I would still be 32 at the last one, but no female athlete has ever attended five. I just love to race. No matter what is going on in my life, there is a certain feeling I get behind the blocks and everything else goes away. The adrenaline rush and having the confidence to lay everything on the line. I love it."

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