

Vollmer, still in one piece, now flying fast for Cal

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Dana Vollmer's path to Cal was circuitous -- from Granbury, Texas, through the 2004 Olympics in Athens to the University of Florida. Along the way, there was a heart problem, a torn knee ligament, a degenerative disk, a bulging disk and chronic tendinitis in her left shoulder.

So she knows the value of a good cardiothoracic surgeon, which is what she plans to become after swimming in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Don't bet against her in either endeavor.

When the 6-foot blond sophomore dives into something, she brings the drive of a Texas tornado with her. And now she doesn't have to carry a portable defibrillator to meets.

She'll be one of several past or future Olympians on display when the third-ranked Bears (10-0 overall, 5-0 in the Pac-10) host No. 1 Stanford (9-0, 5-0) at noon Saturday in what might be the best women's dual meet in the country this year.

It's the final dual meet of the season for both teams, and both have big plans for the Pac-10 meet Feb. 14-16 in Long Beach and the NCAA championships in Minneapolis March 8-10.

Vollmer holds the second-fastest time in the country in the 100 butterfly (52.71 seconds), third in the 200 fly (1 minutes, 56.46 seconds) and third in the 200 freestyle (1:46.04).

"(The season) is going a lot better than I had even imagined," she said. "Coming here, I've gotten a lot healthier, with some of the injuries I've had."

That's a long list, beginning with a heart problem that first cropped up when she was 14. During a workout, her heart rate shot up to 250, then fell off dramatically five minutes later.

She was diagnosed with an extra electrical pathway to her heart and underwent a procedure called a radiofrequency ablation, which uses electrodes to burn off abnormal tissue.

A week later, fully charged, she took fourth in the 100 fly at the nationals. So much for convalescence.

The bad news is that she was also found to have some symptoms of Long QT syndrome, which causes abnormally long delays between heartbeats.

"The highest rate of sudden death in athletes, they believe, is because of this," she said. "I only had random patterns of it."

She didn't have to curtail her workouts but she did have to bring the defibrillator to meets. She was also feeling the effects of back problems and the shoulder tendinitis. Knee surgery had ended her basketball career in middle school. So she was pouring herself into swimming.

At 12, she had been the youngest competitor in the 2000 U.S. Olympic Trials. At 16, she not only went to Athens, she won gold as part of the 800-meter freestyle relay team, which also featured Cal legend Natalie Coughlin.

Being on the podium is "an image that pops in my head every time I hear the national anthem," she said.

Her career took a detour to Florida last year when she decided -- to the chagrin of Cal coach Teri McKeever, who had recruited her -- to attend Florida, thinking that the Gators' approach of long hours in the pool would cut her times. She was painfully wrong.

"We didn't do a lot of rehab," she said. "It was more of a yardage-based program, so my injuries just got worse. At practices, I wouldn't do as much as everyone else. But that took a toll on my confidence and my mentality going into races. I felt I beat myself down."

In May, she called McKeever, whose coaching methods are anything but traditional. They involve stationary bikes, Pilates exercises, weight training, breath-control exercises, even dancing.

"Our program is more about technique and cross-training," McKeever said. "I don't think anybody does it to the extreme I do. This is a good fit for someone who is open to trying some different things."

That's Vollmer, whose heart was pronounced perfectly normal in October and whose shoulder and back feel better. Now she's dancing up a storm. She and her teammates dance to the hip-hop soundtrack of the movie "Step Up."

"I'm definitely not that coordinated," she said. "It taps into different things I haven't tapped into before. I think it directly relates to how you work in the pool. You're working on your core and not using your arms."

Maybe there's a message there to other high-level swimmers: You should be dancing, yeah.

The Big Swim

Who: No. 1 Stanford at No. 3 Cal

in women's swimming

Where: Spieker Aquatics Complex, Berkeley

When: Saturday, noon

Swimmers to watch: Stanford -- freshman Julia Smit (nation's top time in 200 backstroke and 400 individual medley), freshman Elaine Breeden (No. 1 in 200 butterfly), junior Caroline Bruce (2nd in 200 breaststroke); senior Cassidy Krug (diving); junior Brooke Bishop (back, sprint free).

Cal -- sophomore Dana Vollmer (freestyle, butterfly), sophomore Jessica Hardy (fastest time in country in

100 breaststroke), junior Emily Silver (free, IM), senior Erin Reilly (free, fly).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/02/CALSWIMMER.TMP>

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