

Metro's top diver is about more than scoring

Written by Sher Jasperse

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In her own words, she is “a really, really, really competitive person.”

During her high school career, Linn-Mar diver Samantha “Sam” Wagner has twice rewritten the school record book for six-dive (dual meet) and 11-dive (multi-school invitational) scoring. This season, she has vanquished every diver she has faced.

Currently ranked second in the state in six-dive and fifth in 11-dive scoring, Wagner is a virtual lock to mount the diving board at state for the fourth consecutive year.

But a focus on her balletic prowess on the one-meter board misses Wagner’s larger role as the senior leader on a Linn-Mar diving squad that possesses a bounty of young talent, points out diving coach Meghan Sievertsen.

“She has been a dream,” says Sievertsen, a 2005 Kennedy grad who earned three state diving titles for the Cougars and went on to dive at the University of Iowa.

“We have a huge freshman class this year, and she is so supportive of them. She sends them messages before meets, reminds them of things, and tells them to go out and have fun. Nobody asked her to do it, and it’s been absolutely amazing.”

Sievertsen, who has observed Wagner’s athleticism since they were both involved with the local Twisters Gymnastics Club, says her outstanding diver sets the standard for the rest of the squad.

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“She’s a very strong diver. She’s a very hard worker and she’s fortunate to have a natural talent. The motivation she passes on to others makes for a great atmosphere in practice. It makes my job a lot easier.”

If Wagner’s dominance as a diver seems undisputed, it was certainly unexpected – at least to her. Like most divers – including six of the seven girls on Linn-Mar’s squad – she started out in gymnastics and was devoted to the sport from ages 6 to 16.

“I was in the gym upwards of 20 hours a week,” she says.

She dove a couple of times with the Cedar Rapids Aquatics Association while in middle school, but never took it seriously, she notes.

“My dad wanted me to be a swimmer, but I thought I’d drown. I don’t have any endurance. My swim coach said, ‘You’re pretty good at diving. You should look into it,’ but I always stuck to gymnastics.”

In retrospect, it was a great call.

“Gymnastics is definitely what has helped me be a good diver,” she stresses, reeling off the skills honed in the gym. “I learned to flip, twist, jump, rotate, body control, mental strength and commitment.”

As a Linn-Mar freshman, she decided to go out for the swim team and give diving a try. “Diving is a lot easier on all my joints and bones,” she says, “and I thought I had a lot better opportunities in diving than in gymnastics.”

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An accomplished gymnast, she was nonetheless caught off-guard by how quickly her skills translated to diving.

"I didn't realize I was competitive until I started going to meets," she recounts. "I was really surprised. I made it to state as a freshman, and I wasn't expecting it at all."

Three years later, she remains unfazed by her success and devoted to the close-knit team of divers who – a bit like kickers on a football team – are truly a breed apart.

"Divers and swimmers are categorized together," she says, "but they're complete opposites, not at all the same. Swimming is comparable to running, but diving is like gymnastics. It's a mental sport."

Practicing five days a week both in and outside the pool, each diver strives to perfect 11 different dives with varying degrees of difficulty. Wagner's personal favorite – a high-degree-of-difficulty dive that she worked doggedly to master – is the front double-summersault pike.

"Because I'm a senior, the girls look up to me," she says, "and I'm really close to all of them. I want to be a role model for them, and I hope they all beat my scores eventually."

Besides Sievertsen, Wagner's role models include her parents, Nick and Mandie, who have never missed one of her meets. "They're so supportive of everything I do – not just diving – and I'm really grateful to them."

With the Linn-Mar swim team currently riding a wave of senior talent to a seventh-place state ranking, Wagner's personal goal is to make it through the season undefeated – a ride that she and her coach acknowledge will grow choppy as she progresses to regional and state competition. Her first test is at the Mississippi Valley Conference diving meet Thursday at Jefferson.

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Regardless, Wagner evinces the calm of an admiral leading her troops into battle. "I'm focused on always getting better so that I can peak at state," she says.

Beyond that, she adds, "I'm hoping to dive in college at a D-I school. But academics are definitely my main priority. I want to be pre-med and eventually become a surgeon."

With the mental stamina and knife-like precision of a gymnast turned champion diver, who would doubt that she'll someday excel with a scalpel?