

Katie Anton rekindles fire for swimming in Florida

Written by Sher Jasperse

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On a snowy morning shortly before Christmas, while teenagers thronged the malls, Katie Anton swam laps at the Stoney Point YMCA. It's what she does every day – make that every day except Christmas – and it's part of the pattern of sacrifice and reward that have defined her young life.



On Christmas Day she flew back to Naples, Fla., where she is spending her senior year of high school, training seven days a week with an elite swim team far from friends and the family she says is the most important thing in her life.

Although her mother, Pegi Petersen Anton, was a competitive swimmer who held Jefferson High School's 100-yard backstroke and butterfly records at one time, swimming wasn't Katie Anton's first love.

"We had an in-ground pool in our backyard and my dad and I would goof around, but I played soccer with CRSA and I was a fanatic about it."

Her mom enrolled her in a swimming strokes class at age 8 to learn the basics, but swimming didn't become fun until she joined a team, first with the YMCA and then with the more rigorous Cedar Rapids Aquatics Association (CRAA).

"When I turned 10, I started to win a lot and I liked that a lot," she says with a smile. Her CRAA coach, Bobby Kelley, recognized her special talent.

"At 13, I was still playing club soccer," Anton recalls. "Coach said, 'If you quit all other sports, I can get you to the Olympic Trials.' "

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She took the bait – hoping to be among the one percent of American swimmers who qualify for the Trials. Her life became school and swimming, she says, with a focus on her strongest event, the backstroke.

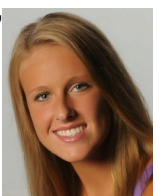
At 14, Anton qualified for the 2008 Trials in the 200 backstroke and finished 33rd out of 99 swimmers at the Omaha event. “It was awesome to be in the top third of all the swimmers in the country,” she says. Fired up, she went on to finish 10th at the Junior Nationals in Seattle.

The next year, as a junior at Jefferson, “I started to lose the fire of swimming,” she says. “Coach told me he had done all he knew how to do for me.” Anton swam briefly on the Jefferson team, then devoted herself to working with the Iowa Flyers (IFly) Swim Club in Iowa City. “I loved the Jefferson team and coaches, but I wanted to do what would get me to the next level.”

Swimming friends in Decorah connected her with Kevin Erndl, a coach in Naples, who invited her to spend the summer after her junior year working with his T2 Aquatics team. “He told me they would help me remember why I liked swimming,” she says.

Intrigued by that promise, Anton and her mother, a Stamats Communications vice president who travels for her work, spent last summer in Florida, sharing a condo with another swimmer and her mother, while the girls trained with T2 Aquatics. Paul Yetter, the 2008 U.S. Olympic swim coach, joined T2 and became Anton’s coach.

“I fell in love with the team, and there was no doubt in my mind that swimming in Florida would get me faster. There are some very fast high school swimmers in Iowa,” she says, “but there are probably five times more swimmers in Florida, and there are a lot of collegiate swimmers.”



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The hard part came at the end of the summer, when Yetter encouraged Anton to stay in Florida to continue developing her skills. "It was a really hard decision for me because I am very close to my family," she says, describing her 13-year-old brother Christian as one of her best friends. "My mom cried. She said she knew I would be going away to college, but she didn't think I would be leaving this soon."

Nevertheless, Anton's mother and her father, Alex, gave her their full support, and she moved in with the family of another swimmer on the Naples team. "I go to high school with her," Anton says. "We have a lot of the same goals, so I don't have to worry about her wanting to go out at night instead of getting to sleep before an early practice."

Anton says she misses her family, Jefferson teachers and classmates every day. She talks daily with her best friend, McKenzie Asplund, who swims for Xavier and IFly, and she's grateful that her parents have been able to attend all of her meets, working around her mother's travel schedule.

"She is the person I really look up to," Anton says. "She has a very strong work ethic. But as much as she works, her family comes first and she always finds time for us. I know she will always be there for me no matter what happens. My parents never put pressure on me to swim," she adds. "They always said I could quit tomorrow if I wanted to."

Happily, Anton's involvement with T2 Aquatics has rekindled her love of swimming, and her times have continued to improve. "Their whole philosophy is that the number one thing is getting the team faster, which will get you faster," she says. "If you're having a good time at practice, you will get faster."

Next year she will return to the Midwest as a swimmer for the University of Minnesota, an NCAA swimming powerhouse, which has awarded her both athletic and academic scholarships.

"I'm so excited to be able to represent them," she says. "I want to become a Big Ten champion in my event. I only have four years of swimming left, then I have to get out of my fantasy world and get a real job. I'm excited to meet new people, and it's only four-and-a-half hours from home, so my parents can see me swim." She plans to major in the sciences with the goal of becoming a doctor.

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Between her freshman and sophomore years, Anton will have another chance to compete at the Olympic Trials, although she does not view the Olympics as her primary objective. "Every swimmer likes to think they'll go to the Olympics, but they don't think about how hard it is to become one of only 22 men and women to make the team," she says.

For now, she spends 15 to 20 hours in the pool each week, plus a few hours doing "dry land exercises," preparing for the Florida State Championships in February.

It takes an ocean of motivation, she admits, to spend endless hours swimming back and forth in a pool.

"You're not going to be an Olympic athlete unless swimming is your whole life," she emphasizes. "You can't be going out with your friends every night and eating at fast food restaurants. But the great part is the support you have from your team. You're all in it together, and when someone is feeling down, you encourage each other, and that makes it fun."