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HEADLINE: SPORTS: CC swimmer dives headfirst into life

BYLINE: By **BOB SCHALLER**, The Gazette

DATELINE: COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo.

BODY:

Ruth Smith's eyes are heavy as she forces a smile. She could be tired from an exhausting workout for the Colorado College women's swimming team, where as an individual medley competitor she swims all four strokes - breaststroke, backstroke, freestyle and butterfly.

Rather, as a deaf student-athlete, she had spent three hours lip-reading in class that morning.

"That," she said with a dimpled smile, "can really wear me out. But in a good way."

Born prematurely, her hearing loss was caused by a medicine transmitted through her mother's breast milk. She can hear only the lowest-pitched noises. No one figured out she was deaf until she was almost 4. Her intellectual development masked the disability.

A native of Alexandria, Va., Smith decided, along with her parents, to be "mainstreamed" in school - and in everything else - so she learned to read lips. She learned to speak flawlessly after extensive work with a speech therapist.

A standout in her younger days - she was within a second of the USA Swimming Junior National qualifying time as a 14-year-old - she decided to stop swimming as a sophomore in high school.

"The competitive part of it ... I was just too competitive and needed a break," she said.

She focused on other sports. She was a standout lacrosse and soccer player in high school, and even played lacrosse briefly at Colorado College.

During her senior year of high school, an academic adviser told her about CC's block program, which involves one class at a time over about a three-week period.

"I liked the idea of only focusing on one class at a time and having to lip-read only one professor," said Smith, a senior. "By then I had realized I wanted to get off the East Coast and see more of the country. I was also interested in hiking and exploring the Rockies during the block breaks as well as participating in other activities with my friends."

She immediately fell in love with CC. She resumed swimming, the break only reinforcing her zeal for the sport. She began training with renewed passion. After winning the 400 IM at the Liberal Arts Invitational

Championships this spring, she has her sights set on qualifying for Division III NCAAs this season.

She says friendships with her teammates make swimming especially enjoyable. The only impediment her deafness causes is at the start of races: Since she can't hear the horn, she has to go off the starting light, which can cost her precious fractions of a second. But she's working on her starts. Her coach, Brian Pearson, said he can't imagine a harder worker.

"She doesn't want to let it (being deaf) get her down or anything like that," Pearson said. "She's worked so hard to assimilate herself into the hearing community. She's just a really great kid."

Smith also took a break last year and went to Italy, which she "absolutely loved." Now she's back hard at work in the classroom and pool. She's majoring in English with a film specialty, which she says works well with her love for visual images, particularly her favorite hobby of photography.

"I'm the most visual person you could imagine," she says. "Of course I 'hear' with my eyes."

Swimming has also helped her.

"The water has always brought me such a sense of peace," she said thoughtfully, her blue eyes sparkling. "It's given me a sense of confidence, and a sense of belonging. I'm so happy to be out on my own. No matter who you are, or what challenges you face, you really can do anything you want if you're willing to work hard for it."

On the Net:

Colorado College: <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/index.asp>

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