

Diana Munz overcomes broken back

By Bob Schaller, Special USA-Swimming.org Correspondent

She might be the best swimmer that few people have ever heard of.

How about 20 National titles? A pair of Olympic medals? But as Diana Munz walks across campus at tiny John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio, she is not well known in this setting. And she doesn't mind it a bit.

"I'm not that kind of person," she says. "I want people to know me for myself – who I am as a person. I go to a small private school where not a lot of people know what I've done. A few know around campus, but not many. Sometimes I'll be around town shopping, and someone will be like, 'I know who you are! Why didn't you tell me?'"

She actually isn't THAT much of an unknown. After all, her 2002 season was about as exposure-filled as a season can be. She won the Kiphuth Award at last year's Spring Nationals as the highest individual women's scorer. At the ConocoPhillips Summer Nationals, she won the 400m and 800m free, and was third in the 200 free, before going on to win gold in the 400m, 800m and 1500m free (and the 800 free relay) at the Pan Pacific Championships. She also won the 800m free and took fifth in the 400m free at the U.S. Open.

So the swimmer whom so few knew became more well-known – again, just as she had in 2000.

"The (Kiphuth Award) was pretty crazy, actually, because at first I had no idea I was close," she said. "You go to Nationals, and you don't think about it. Then the numbers added up, and I heard that I was close. I was like, 'No way, you've got to be kidding me.' I couldn't believe it."

The Kiphuth Award-winner list reads like a swimming history encyclopedia of the best U.S. swimmers ever.

"I look at people on that list, and it's incredible," she says. "I look at Janet Evans, who is just so amazing, and to inch my way up anywhere near that level is a great feeling."

Munz hasn't snuck up on anyone. She's made a steady progression to the elite ranks. She's seen others talk themselves up, only to end up explaining why what they said would happen never did.

"The people who say, 'I'm going to win an Olympic medal'...well, what if they don't?" she says. "The media hypes up their comments, and everyone remembers that. I grew up respecting people. I think those kinds of things, too, but I keep it to myself."

She doesn't train in the center of the media's attention, nor on a high-profile club by any stretch. In fact, she still trains with the same club she started with as a 7-year-old, the Lake Erie Silver Dolphins. Of course, that means most of her teammates now are kids, with the oldest being 15 to 17 years old.

"That's hard at times," says Munz, who turns 21 on June 19. "It's hardest in the winter, because wintertime is so long, and I'm not swimming in college. I can only be a part of the conversation for so long when they get to, 'So, where's the high school party tonight?'"

She laughs at the reality of being a woman around kids. But it's also something that's kept her focused, and kept her from becoming burned out. In fact, the Silver Dolphins have a very fast 16-year-old in former National Junior Team member Alyssa Kiel, who competes with Munz.

And Munz still lives at home, something she has absolutely no problem with because, again, it keeps her grounded and allows her to concentrate on her goals both in and out of the water.

"Everything I earn is being put away," she says. "Maybe someday I'll get my own house. At least I won't start out empty-handed when I graduate from college."

Train accident: "Your back is broken"

There are noises on the road, a street Diana Munz will never travel again.

A set of train tracks runs smack down the center of the road, with lanes running each way, straddling the tracks on each side.

When there is a train on the tracks, the noise is deafening. When there is no train, the silence is broken by car horns and braking. When Munz was headed down the road with friends in a Volkswagen Beetle after a swim meet in July of 1999, she came up to a light. As she went through the intersection, a delivery truck, which had blown through a red light, came over the tracks and broadsided her car.

"I remember being told how lucky I was," Munz said. "Someone said, 'If that truck would've hit you a half-second later, it would've killed you.'"

That split second allowed Munz to avoid being hit broadside right in her door. But she didn't feel that "lucky" as she lay in a hospital bed, four vertebrae in her lower back compressed – a "broken back" the doctors called it.

"It was scary," she says quietly. "It was pretty bad in the hospital for a while."

Her mother stayed by her bedside that critical first night. The medical staff woke her up every 15 minutes and would ask her to move her feet and wiggle her toes. She only

wanted to sleep. In the morning, the doctors told her the reason for the constant late night visits.

They were worried she'd be paralyzed from the waist down.

“Thank goodness they didn't tell me that until the next morning,” she says. “It's pretty scary to think about it now.”

Ironically, it was swimming that helped stave off possible paralysis.

“That's what my doctor said – that swimmers have a lot of muscle in their backs, so they said that helped me a lot,” she said. “It helped in the recovery, too.”

She was preparing for Pan Pacs before the accident, a moment in time that nearly ended her swimming career and her life, had it not been for the impact avoiding her directly.

“I thought I was done swimming,” she said. “I was very negative for a week or two at first. But my family and coaches were very supportive.”

“You broke your back, but you're going to be all right,” she was told by her coaches. “We're going to get you back in the water. We don't want to hear you say you don't want to swim anymore.”

Munz got out of bed and started walking. Her trip back to the water was sooner than she had planned or expected, because her physical therapy was done mostly in a pool.

“I still wasn't even thinking about swimming at first,” she said. “To even think about making the Olympic team didn't seem like it would be possible.”

And she wasn't done in the pool. In what her doctors call a miracle, Munz returned to the water, made the Olympic team, won a silver in the 400m free and then a gold in the 800m free relay.

“To make the team in an event I didn't think I'd make it in was really cool,” Munz said.

The gold on the 800 free relay was memorable, but the silver in the 400 free, since it was an individual event, really crystallized what she had been through just to get to Sydney, let alone medal.

“The relay was neat, touching the wall and looking up, and seeing the close finish,” she said. “But the 400 was more amazing in a personal way, because it was my own individual event.”

On top of that, the 400 itself was one of the more notable performances, because Munz was trailing by a significant distance before hitting the accelerator and overtaking three other swimmers to nab the silver.

“I was so far behind in that race,” she said. “But I came back.”

Fitting, since getting back in the water and making the U.S. Olympic team had been a comeback worth remembering on its own merits.

“I had worked really hard just to get back in the water – I went to every practice with the attitude of doing everything right,” she said.

She was a senior in high school that year, just 18 years old. She had a lot of options, like swimming in college. Realizing how short a window swimmers and other Olympic athletes face in making a living doing what they love to do, she turned professional.

“I knew I wanted to keep swimming after the Games,” she said. “I took some time off after the Olympics, but I knew I wanted to push for 2004. A lot of people back off for a year or two after the Olympics and then come back. But I decided to turn professional and try to make some money.”

Looking back, Munz calls the decision an easy one.

“I love to swim. I love the competition. I love to travel. I love the team. I needed that competition,” she said.

She still avoids that road in the town of Shaker, Ohio, “a very cute little town,” she says, where her sister lives.

“When I go back to visit my sister, I go the back way,” she says. “Just seeing that road makes me cringe. I get chills up and down my spine.”

Munz is majoring in communications at John Carroll and would like to be in TV.

“Sure, being the next Katie Couric would be great,” she says, laughing, “But everyone in this (major) wants to be Katie Couric.”

But she’s still got a lot of swimming left in her.

“In the past year or so, it’s been very hard because I’m getting older, and my body can’t take what it took when I was younger,” says Munz, a close friend of fellow Olympian and distance standout Kaitlin Sandeno. “I did so much yardage – miles and miles and then some more miles. It’s fun now because some of the sprinting things are benefiting my distance events.”

She doesn’t train as long now, but she hopes that the experience she has helps her train harder.

“I am very focused on doing everything I possibly can, doing everything my coach tells me,” she says. “When I was younger, I had tons of fun and enjoyed it with my friends.

Now I swim for different reasons. I want to go to the next Olympics, maybe break a world record. I have more goals I want to achieve.”

She’s not ruling out a break after the next Olympics. No matter what, she’ll always be a swimmer.

“I’ll take a year or so off, but I’ll always come back to the water,” she says. “It’s relaxing, and good for your body. I want to be in shape for the rest of my life.”

Part of that is mental shape, and that’s where Munz is so solid. She never looks back, except to learn. Though she says she could’ve been happy swimming for one of the college powerhouses, she realizes that each person’s path is her own, and she knows she chose wisely for herself.

“I’m happy with my decision,” she said. “I stick by it. There are pros and cons to both sides. I have a different life being here versus other college kids. They are living in dorms, apartments with other people having a great time, going out all the time. I live at home, though I do go out with my boyfriend. I think this choice has helped me with my swimming, because it made me more mature and let me focus on my life, so I didn’t waste time. Sure there are times when I wish I would’ve gone far away. But when everything is taken into consideration, I’m glad I’m where I’m at.”

There was a logistical reason for not swimming in college, too, one she says benefited both her and any prospective college team.

“I hate short course!” she says, laughing, “and I can’t swim it, either! That made the decision quite easy.”