

From Splash Magazine

Setting the bar high:

Natalie Coughlin

By **Bob Schaller**/*Special Splash Correspondent*.

Though she is atop the swimming world by anyone's standards, Natalie Coughlin would rather talk about swimming for Cal coach Teri McKeever. Or her "awesome teammates" that "keep me going and make it fun."

Coughlin, a 2000 high school graduate, is approaching American records in her "off events." She was named NCAA Swimmer of the Year as a freshman. She won the 100m back in American record time at 2001 Worlds, and then broke that record again leading off the medley relay that took silver, not to mention another gold on the American record-breaking 800m free relay. She set two world records (100m, 200m back) and another American record (50m fly) at the World Cup in New York in December, earning Swimmer of the Meet honors.

The success in the other events might be catching the swimming world off guard. But she traces her motivation back to her history as a distance swimmer.

"I always wanted to be a sprinter, even though all through high school I was distance," Coughlin said. "I got to Cal and joked with Teri, 'I'm a sprinter now, come on.' I think I'm just really competitive. I don't think I'm supposed to be as fast as I am in the sprints. I just like racing people. I get into the moment."

And, oh yeah, she's also an honor student at a school known as much for its academic challenges as its athletic prowess.

Yet only three years ago, she wasn't sure if she'd swim much longer, hoping to "just make it through swimming and college, and then stop" because of a severe left shoulder injury.

She had finished fourth at the 2000 Olympic Trials. While many swimmers are devastated by missing the Olympic team by fractions of a second, Coughlin wasn't at all. Indeed, she says it simply wasn't her time – yet.

"By the time Trials came, I was really having a tough time dealing with my shoulder injury and issues surrounding that," Coughlin said. "I really didn't expect anything going into that meet. The way I ended that meet, my thinking was, 'If I make it, great, if not, I get to go to college.' It wasn't that big of a deal. I know it sounds funny, but I had

expected that I wasn't 100 percent. I was looking forward to moving into the dorms and starting college."

Coughlin actually arrived battered – emotional and physically – at Cal a little over a year ago. She went through non-surgery rehab for the shoulder injury, one that sapped all of her mental and physical energy.

But McKeever brought in stroke gurus Milt Nelms and Bill Boomer who changed and refined her movement, alleviating all the stress on her shoulder. As she got back to – and stayed – at 100 percent, her comfort level rose, as did her mood. And that sank the competition.

The changes didn't pay dividends right away.

"It was hard for me to make those changes," Coughlin said. "You take a few steps backward when you make changes. For two weeks I wasn't making any progress, wasn't even making intervals I had made when I was 14. Plus the start of college is hard. Eventually my stroke improved. Then it got efficient, and didn't put as much pressure on my shoulders. That was huge. We also increased our weight program. My back was a lot stronger. The (success) came from pretty much all of the above. I was really excited to be in a different situation, with a fresh start, basically. I was just really happy to have a different atmosphere, to start over."

Coughlin could tell you how her club coach for the Terrapins, Ray Mitchell, took her to lofty heights at age 14. With two gold medals from the 2001 World Championships, a performance at the World Cup that included two world records, Coughlin has turned the swimming world on its ear.

Mitchell saw the talent early. And it was as much mental as physical.

"At first, when she came to us at age 12, what we saw was just an incredible competitive spirit," Mitchell said. "But she was a hacker. She had one speed – all out, and it was a good speed. Her technique got better and better, and coupled with her athletic ability, she went a long way."

Her mind took her that far, and more recently to points beyond. Yet it was during those club days that Coughlin thrived to compete. She calls it "the moment," when her spirit takes over. Mitchell knows that as well as anyone.

"Without a doubt, early in her career, when she was coming up with national level performances, she looked forward to racing Jenny Thompson and the great swimmers of that day who were still head and shoulders above her at that time," Mitchell said. "Some kids get gun shy going against the top swimmers. Not Natalie. She was excited to go against them. She is fearless in that sense, and that's the type of swimming you see out of her now. She has the talent. But she also has the other side of that coin – the incredible drive and psychological makeup to be world class."

Or, as has been the case lately, in a class of her own.

“She was obviously extremely talented when she came in here,” McKeever said. “She fits in so well with this team. And I can’t tell you how many recruits we’ve had in here that are amazed that Natalie is so nice, so personable. When someone is that successful, and she’s been successful in various ways for a long time, you don’t expect them to be ‘normal’ and approachable.”

Coughlin loves meeting kids. She also remembers the feeling she got meeting her idols when she was younger, like Summer Sanders. And in September of 2001, the most dominating women’s swimmer in the land – and among the world’s best – found herself feeling like a kid again. She was able to meet another hero, Janet Evans.

“With any other swimmer, I wouldn’t get nervous, but this is Janet Evans!” Coughlin says, still excited at the memory. “I talked to her, just sitting with her on the bus, and it was so surreal. She’s one that I’ve always looked up to, so it was incredible to meet her. I realized this might be how little kids feel when they meet me now.”

She is approached by sprinters and distance swimmers alike, because of her versatile success. Again, the roots of her diverse success started at a young age. And though her records are in the backstroke, that was an event she came to late.

“She was making senior national cuts in every event,” Mitchell said. “Her backstroke didn’t come around until later, when we worked on underwater kicking. Natalie is such a great kicker.”

She also had to adapt at Worlds – and trials – to long course. That’s why her goal was just to continue to improve, not break records left and right.

“I didn’t have many expectations when I started college,” Coughlin said. “College, and college swimming, is a wonderful experience. My teammates are so great. We race each other in practice every day. They really push me, and I push them. I started to improve right away.”

Again, it wasn’t just in her specialty. During one of her first collegiate meets, she went 1:48 in the 200 freestyle.

“How am I swimming so fast already?” Coughlin remembers asking herself after that meet.

Then, “the rest of the meets were like that, too. Things got better and better.”

And at NCAAs, World Championships and the World Cup, things got even better.

“By the end of December (2000), my confidence was going so far up,” Coughlin said. “I was excited to swim and go to practice. It’s a huge, great feeling.”

It's a feeling she shares now, in demand as a speaker because of her performance the past year.

"I talked at the Pacific (LSC) awards banquet about how important it is to enjoy what you're doing," Coughlin said. "That's the difference for me, not taking anything for granted. It's given me a new perspective to realize that swimming is a sport, so it's something you should enjoy. Since we're working out so many hours a week, you might as well give it your best and enjoy every minute. Because if you're not using every minute to your advantage, you're wasting time. And if you're not enjoying it, you're wasting time. I don't think I've ever liked swimming more than I do now. I always thought as soon as college was over I'd quit swimming, as soon as my eligibility was up, I'd quit. The last few months I started thinking, 'I should do this as long as I can, as long as I am enjoying it.'

Her name is in lights now – literally, on scoreboards at the world's biggest meets – and often there's a No. 1 next to her name.

"I was seeded first going into Worlds," Coughlin said. "I waited the whole time for the 100 backstroke. I ran into the lane line in the final 25, but still hit the wall first, even though it slowed me down. Let me tell you, I still get kidded about that mistake – it's something a 9-year-old does in their first meet, not at Worlds."

Then she added the record-setting performance in her leg of the 400 medley relay.

"Just do your best," Coughlin told herself.

Literally, she did. And there was more good news.

With an endearing, sheepish grin, she adds:

"And I didn't hit the lane line."