

## Three local swimmers living Olympic Trials dream

Written by Sher Jasperse

Sunday, 24 June 2012 12:59 - Last Updated Saturday, 30 June 2012 20:41

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Brede (BJ) Kolsrud will never forget the day, the moment, the feeling.

His storied swimming career at Washington High School and Stanford University was at its end. He had completed his Master's degree in mechanical engineering at Stanford and was days from beginning his job as a combustion engineer at Siemens Energy in Charlotte, N.C.

Just over a year ago, with the start of his new job delayed a few days from June until July, he decided to compete in one last swim meet.

"It was in Des Moines at an outdoor pool," he says. "I had so much fun, and in the last swim of the meet I got my Trials cut" – the 50-meter freestyle time that qualified him – by one one-hundredth of a second – to compete in the 2012 U.S. Olympic Swimming Trials.

"I don't even have words to describe it," Kolsrud says. "It's so many years of effort, so many hours in the pool. As a kid, your biggest dream is to be on the Olympic team, and one step below that is the Trials. I had been so close, so close, so close.

"I was all alone driving home, and all I could think of was seeing my family and saying, 'Happy Father's Day. I just qualified for the Olympic Trials.'"

Kolsrud is one of three local swimmers – three of the best ever to ply the waters of Cedar Rapids pools – who are sharing the ecstasy of that achievement. Joining him are fellow Wash grad Ryan Phelan and former Jefferson prep Katie Anton, who finished her high school career last year in Florida, where she swam with the elite T2 Aquatics team.

They will be among the less than one percent of all eligible swimmers who qualified to compete in this week's U.S. Olympic Trials in Omaha.

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“It’s a very select few,” says Cedar Rapids Aquatics Association (CRAA) head coach Bobby Kelley, who has coached all three. “It only happens once every four years, so your timing has to be right, and you have to make the qualifying time.”

Nationwide, some 100 to 200 swimmers or relay teams qualify for each event, with only the top two finishers at the Trials winning a spot on the Olympic team for the 2012 Summer Games in England.

Anton also qualified for the 2008 Trials in her signature event, the 200 backstroke, at age 14. Before that, says Kelley, no local swimmer had qualified for the Trials since Linn-Mar’s Ryan Morrissey in 2000.

### **A special trio**

“All three of them swim or swam at very fast Division I-level schools,” Kelley says of this year’s qualifiers. “They are super competitive.” The CRAA record books, in fact, are filled with their names – a testament to the talent and temperament that set them apart from a young age.

Anton, who placed 33rd out of 99 finishers in her event at the 2008 Trials, now swims for the University of Minnesota, the reigning Big Ten champion.

“It’s a very cool opportunity to get to go to the Trials even once,” she says. “To get to go twice is amazing. I was pretty nervous the first time. This time I’m going to relax and take it all in. This will be my last time at the Trials unless I go as a spectator.”

Kelley remembers Anton as a swimmer with unbelievable tenacity. “You can give her hard sets, longer and longer distances, and the pace she can hold is just amazing,” he says.

Like most Trials competitors, her goal is to swim better than ever in competition with those who have reached the pinnacle of her sport. “I’m looking to swim faster than my best time and place higher than in 2008,” she says.

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Phelan, like Kolsrud, will swim the 50 free – an event he won at the 2008 Iowa state meet during his senior year at Wash, when the Warriors were state champs. He went on to swim at the University of Iowa, where he graduated this spring and will begin Pharmacy School in the fall.

Phelan's path to swimming greatness was a little unusual, says Kelley. "He didn't start club swimming year-round until he was a freshman in high school, but he developed very fast. The guy is just a ball of muscle, incredibly strong. He has the most explosive start of anyone I've ever worked with. Ryan and BJ are both super, super explosive.

"Ryan had an amazing career at Iowa," he adds. "He qualified for NAAs, earned All-American status, was a Big Ten champion in a couple of relays, runner-up in the 50 free at Big Tens, holds a couple of school records, and has done well at USA Swimming Nationals."

Phelan is relishing his chance to perform with the nation's best after missing the qualifying time by three one-hundredths of a second in 2008.

"For me, going to the U.S. Trials is really a dream come true," he says. "I definitely cherish the opportunity and feel blessed. Swimming is a sport about 100ths of a second. I was close to the cut four years ago but was a little underdeveloped. Last year I finally qualified."

### **A new perspective**

Kolsrud, a 2006 Wash grad who won the 50 free at state in his sophomore year, has waited longer than either of his former CRAA teammates for his Trials date – and almost ended his career without getting there.

His high school ambition was to get to Stanford – a perennial swimming powerhouse and top engineering school – and he got his call from Stanford not long after winning his state title. But he chose to quit the sport and concentrate on his engineering studies after his sophomore year in college. It was his first break from swimming in a dozen years.

The next year the swim captain called and asked if he'd return to the team to help coach. "I got

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a chance to watch the best in the country, went to the NCAAs, and saw how they trained for the next level.”

A little overweight and out of shape, he got pulled back into the sport by a post-grad student looking for a training partner.

“We pushed each other. He was way ahead, then I started noticing that I was getting faster,” Kolsrud recalls. “I had had a year refresher and started training with a new perspective and getting my best times. With 2012 coming up, I decided to make a run at it and kept coming close.”

It all came together on that summer evening in Des Moines.

Even with support from his co-workers, training for the Trials while immersing himself in a new job has been a challenge, he admits. “I did it at the end of the day or the early morning, lifting weights at my apartment complex, going to the aquatic center two or three times a week, and sometimes ‘stealing fitness,’ as I call it, by surfing or wake boarding for four hours at a time.”

With Anton majoring in chemistry, Phelan heading for an advanced degree in pharmacy and Kolsrud earning a Master’s in mechanical engineering, Kolsrud pondered the correlation between swimming and the sciences.

“Swimming in some sense is an art, but at the end of the day it’s all fluid mechanics, trying to make sense of all the chaos that can happen, using hypothesis and conclusion and working it out. But I know some lit majors who are good swimmers too,” he laughs.

Looking back on his career, Kolsrud credits his coaches – at CRAA, Wash and Stanford – with giving him the belief that he could excel as a swimmer.

“The people who helped me put the pieces in place, seeing those 20 championship banners

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hanging on the wall at Washington, leaving a legacy that others will strive to be part of – that’s what inspires me.

“Getting to the Trials is huge,” he says, still struggling to find the words. “To take something you started when you were seven and now you’re 23 years old and to finish by getting that last big goal, it’s just enormous.”

It’s also enormous for the kids – including a few dozen CRAA swimmers – who will be watching their local heroes compete at the Trials, Kelley says.

“It motivates them so much. It’s an amazing set-up at the Qwest Center, and the place will be packed for eight days. It’s so exciting. It’s a validation of the work we ask them to do. It’s their Olympics – to see the dream come true.”