

C.R. swimmers cherish 'lifetime experience' at U.S. Trials

Written by Jim Ecker

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Three kids from the Cedar Rapids Aquatics Association grew up and competed in the 2012 U.S. Olympic Swimming Trials Saturday in Omaha.

They didn't make the team -- only the top-2 finishers in each event will represent the United States at the Summer Games in England -- but they certainly beat the odds by making the Trials.

"The experience of going is like one in a million," said Ryan Phelan, a former state champion at Cedar Rapids Washington who enjoyed a record-setting career at the University of Iowa.

Phelan and BJ Kolsrud, another former state champ from Washington, both swam in the 50-meter freestyle trials Saturday morning. Katie Anton, who began her prep career at Jefferson before moving to Florida to train with an elite program, competed in the 200 backstroke.

"It didn't go as well as I wanted it to, but it was still a great experience," said Anton.

Phelan tied for 36th out of 167 swimmers in the 50-meter freestyle in 23.01 seconds, which was slightly behind his qualifying time of 22.96 seconds. Kolsrud tied for 123rd in the same event in 23.68 seconds, which was slower than his qualifying time of 23.48.

There were 17 heats in the 50-meter freestyle. Anthony Ervin had the fastest time in all the heats at 21.83 seconds.

Anton, entering her sophomore year with the University of Minnesota swim team, tied for 106th out of 186 finishers in the 200-meter backstroke in 2 minutes, 18.56 seconds. There were 19 heats in the 200 back and Missy Franklin led the qualifying at 2:08.36.

Anton participated in the U.S. Olympic Trials in 2008 when she was only 14 years old. Her goal

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was to swim faster this time than she did four years ago, but it didn't happen.

"Not quite," she said. "But four years ago I was a little more rested than I was this year, just because my priorities had changed a little bit. But I'm pretty satisfied with how I did."

Phelan represented the University of Iowa at the Trials and Anton represented the University of Minnesota, but Kolsrud -- a Stanford graduate -- was identified as a member of the Cedar Rapids Aquatics Association on the official entry list.

Phelan said there was a strong contingent of CRAA members at the CenturyLink Center for the Trials on Saturday.

"At least 30 of them," he said. "I could see them up in their section (in the stands). I think it's a great experience for them to be at this meet."

Phelan said he spoke with CRAA head coach Bobby Kelley at the Trials -- Kelley coached all three of Saturday's contestants when they were younger -- and he also spoke with some of the CRAA swimmers themselves.

"I had a chance to talk to a few of them, which was nice," said Phelan. "A couple of good reactions I got were, 'I'll be here in 2016.' That was very nice and a quick comeback for a kid. I actually heard that a few times today.

"I like to talk to them whenever I can," he said. "I never know what kind of an impact I can make, but I encourage them to do the best they can."

Phelan waved to the CRAA members in the crowd before his race. "I sure did," he said proudly.

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Anton planned to return to Minneapolis on Sunday to resume her life as a college student. Kolsrud works as an engineer in Charlotte, N.C., while Phelan will be entering pharmacy school in the fall.

Phelan called the Olympic Trials a "once in a lifetime" opportunity.

"When the race ended is when I really got to thinking and realized that was probably the biggest race in the last one of my career," he said. "It was an honor to compete and try to be part of the U.S. Olympic team. I was honored to be there.

"You have to be in the top two to make the team, so it didn't really matter after that. The United States is the fastest country. It's the hardest country to qualify for the Olympic team. It's amazing how fast the competition really is."

Phelan said there were probably more than 10,000 fans in the arena Saturday morning. "This is by far the largest crowd I've ever swum in front of," he said.

Phelan knew he faced steep odds, yet cherished the opportunity.

"It's the biggest event in swimming," he said. "It's what we look forward to, it's what we train for once you qualify in college. It's one of those accomplishments that you'll never forget and it will never leave you."

Phelan said all the swimmers received U.S. Olympic water bottles, licence plate covers and souvenir watches for participating.

"Not anything spectacular," he said. "Little watches and souvenirs to help you remember."