

Okamoto is big surprise for Coe swimmers

Written by Tom Fruehling
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Ayaka Okamoto came to Coe College last summer to learn English and American culture.

By the time she heads back home to Tokyo at the end of the academic year, she'll have her name prominently listed on the big record-board at the Coe swimming pool on campus.

At the elite Liberal Arts Swimming Championships held the past four days at Principia College in Elsah, Ill., Okamoto finished second in the 100-yard backstroke in record-breaking time. She also swam on several relays that earned medals at the major meet.

No one could be more tickled by the happy happenstance than Okamoto herself or Coach Brian Ruffles.

"I didn't meet her until the first week of classes in the fall," says Ruffles. "She's been a wonderful surprise."

Indeed, she won her very first race in Coe's first dual competition back in October and hasn't stopped winning ever since. Twice this year she was named Iowa Conference Swimmer of the Week.

Besides her numerous relay and backstroke marks, she also has set a school record in the butterfly.

"Ayaka has done a little bit of everything for us this year," Ruffles explains. "She's very well-rounded and can swim any event. She's versatile and will do whatever we ask her to do."

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It certainly wasn't what he planned before the season began.

With two years of classes behind her majoring in international studies at Waseda University in Tokyo, the 20-year-old Okamoto is at Coe only for this year as part of an exchange program between the two colleges. There are currently about a dozen Japanese students on campus with a similar number from here studying abroad at Waseda.

While touring the Coe campus upon her arrival from Japan last August, Okamoto's student guide by coincidence was junior swimmer Andrew Koehler. When he showed her the swimming pool she told him she'd like to go out for the women's team.

Back in Tokyo, she had once placed fifth for her age group in the backstroke at the national Junior Olympics and eighth nationally in a freestyle relay.

A swimmer since the age of five, she also competed on her college team.

"I said, 'OK'," recalls Ruffles when told of her interest. "Then I saw her times from Japan and thought, 'Wow, she has close to national qualifying times.' Her times were just outstanding."

Okamoto, who is still learning to speak English but is highly proficient in writing it, says being a Kohawk team member was daunting at first.

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“When I came here, I was really nervous,” she wrote in response to a question. “I couldn’t understand English so I didn’t know what my swimming teammates say. I cried two or three times.

“But my teammates really help me. Everyone is very kind.”

Now, she couldn’t be happier.

And she says by far the best part of the season so far was the training trip the team took to California.

“Disneyland,” she asserts with a glorious grin, “was the most fun. I love the roller coasters.”

Joyful shrieking, it seems, is an international language.