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Tulare's pool shark

Mallory Korenwinder earns national ranking in breaststroke

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Entering a big-time swim meet for the first time is a nerve-wracking experience for anybody at any age.

There are plenty of sights that could shatter one's confidence — hundreds of swimmers from points all over the map, including 10-year-olds who swim like they're 20-year veterans to name one.

So it's easy to understand why there were a million butterflies flying around inside the stomach of a then 8-year-old Mallory Korenwinder when she entered her first major swimming event in 2006.

"I was very scared. It was a little too intimidating," Korenwinder said.

A family friend had an idea to help Korenwinder with her nerves for these big swim meets: Imagine an animal that you would want to be, and pretend you're that animal during your race.

Korenwinder heeded the friend's advice, and selected a cheetah.

Her choice made all the sense in the world. Cheetahs are the fastest animals on the face of the Earth, and she's trying to be the fastest swimmer in the pool when she dives in.

The cheetah persona worked like a charm.

Not only did it help quell Korenwinder's big-meet nerves, it helped her develop into one of the nation's fastest swimmers for her age bracket.

USA Swimming, the national governing body for competitive swimming in the United States, recognized Korenwinder on Nov. 1 as one of the top 10 swimmers in the girls' 11-year-old division in both the 50-meter and 100-meter breaststroke events for the 2008-09 swim season.

Korenwinder, a sixth grader at Live Oak Middle School, ended the year ranked seventh nationally in both events for her age bracket.

"To be recognized in the top 10 was one of my goals, and it felt really good to do it. I felt very honored when I found out," Korenwinder said.

How fast is Korenwinder swimming?

Consider that the United States' Sharon Wichman, a gold medalist in the 200-meter breaststroke at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, also had a bronze in those Olympics in the 100-meter breaststroke with a time of 1 minute, 16.1 seconds.

Korenwinder's top time in the 100-meter breaststroke of 1:21.65, is just 5.55 seconds off that medal-winning mark — and she's only 11 years old.

Korenwinder's time of 36.94 seconds in the 50-meter breaststroke was the best mark in the state for 11-year old girls.

"It's pretty amazing," Kim Korenwinder said of her daughter's accomplishment. "When you look at how many swimmers there are across the country, and she's among the top 10 in her event, it's a little overwhelming. It's hard to believe."

Korenwinder first became involved in competitive swimming with the Tulare Sharks, a local recreational swim team when she was 6, and quickly emerged as one of the team's top swimmers. Her pool prowess led to interest from the Tule Nation Tritons, a local swim club team that competes and practices year-round.

At the age of eight, she joined TNT, and started competing in meets throughout the Western United States. In her first meet with TNT, she qualified for a Junior Olympics meet, and soon started making the necessary times to compete in the state's top events.

"It's been a great experience," Korenwinder said. "I like the competition, and I've had a chance to meet people from all over. I've had a lot of fun."

In order to swim in these big-time swimming events, it takes a big-time commitment.

Korenwinder practices two hours a day, five days a week, every week of the year.

"She's very committed to the sport. She's got her cap and goggles on, and ready to dive in before I even say anything to start practice," TNT age-group coach Angela Martinho said. "She's very coachable, too. You tell her to do something new just one time, and she does it right immediately."

Korenwinder's positive attitude combined with her physical strengths makes for a promising future.

"She's very buoyant. She swims at the top of the water, and having that ability is huge in swimming. And her kick is so strong," Martinho said.

Perhaps the lone thing that her coaches are weary of in regards to Korenwinder's future in the sport is her fondness for dirt bikes. Her uncle, Mike Korenwinder, captured the Iron Man title to the 2008 Baja 1000 motorcycle race.

The next big step for Korenwinder is to make it to sectional meets — events that are scattered throughout the country, and pit the nation's top swimmers against each other on one stage.

"We're committed to supporting her for as long as she's healthy and happy," Kim Korenwinder said.

One thing about Korenwinder that stands her apart from most 11-year-olds — make that even most teenagers — is that she has a defined vision of what she would like to accomplish.

"Some of my long-term goals are the Olympics, or trying to get a scholarship for college," Korenwinder said. "My short-term goals are to improve my other strokes, and to do better on my turns. I'm just going to try my best, and see what I can do."