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A Mermaid in Moraga

By Cathy Dausman



Alison "Ali" Williams, the mermaid Photos
Cathy Dausman

Imagine working on a treadmill while holding your breath. Then complete your workout upside down ... and underwater.

Such is the current life of Alison "Ali" Williams, who happily devotes six hours daily, six days a week submersed in Campolindo High School's SODA pool to practice with the USA Synchro National Swim Team.

She is one of only two non-collegiate synchro swimmers in the country (Concord teammate Mariya Koroleva is the other) and one of nine members on "team one," together since September, making their international debut at the French Open in March - a 10th member joins in January. The team will compete at the Pan American Games in Toronto, Canada, but their focus is the bi-annual World Aquatics Championships in Kazan, Russia, beginning July 24.

Williams has lived for the sport, training on her own since she was 10, and sacrificed in the process. Yet she calls herself a mermaid, and describes synchro swimming as a "dream job."

"I'm pretty quiet, go to bed early, and [am] very low maintenance. I am very focused on training for the Olympics so my lifestyle is pretty simple and hardworking," she said. Home-schooled through high school, Williams attended UCLA for three years, where she majored in sociology. She left school, moved to Indianapolis to train with a synchro swim team, then dropped the sport for two and a half years.

"It's a long time to be away from the sport and come back," she admitted. Some said she'd be too old to compete, but she attended team tryouts at Diablo Valley College last June. Suddenly the "location, the coaching and training schedule" felt right, Williams said. She made more sacrifices: relocating to Lamorinda, leaving family, and sleeping for 10 weeks in a 30-foot trailer with "no electricity, no heat, no refrigerator, no bathroom." Yet Williams loved "the peace, quiet, and shelter it provided."

She'd sleep with her clothes in the bed, to warm them before rising at 5 a.m. and cycling to the pool. She microwaved her breakfast there before morning practice, showered at the pool, and visited the library where she read, warmed herself and recharged her phone. Williams sought more permanent lodging when the weather turned, and found a house-sitting position in Moraga through social media. Williams said she has found a welcoming swim community in Lamorinda, which helps with her transition.

The Synchro swimmers range in age from 16 to mid-20s. It is an all-women's sport, although one male performs at the World Championships in Russia. Williams, who turned 25 Nov. 30, is the oldest. Seven members came out of clubs with reputations for turning out Olympic swimmers (five trained with the Santa Clara Aquamaids, two with the Walnut Creek Aquanuts). A sixth member trained on a team in suburban Buffalo, N.Y. Williams, who was raised in Southern California and had a swimming pool in her backyard, is unaffiliated.

These competitors swim as a group of eight or in duets. There are also categories for solo and combo performances. Strength, flexibility, and lung capacity are key to success in a sport where swimmers spend up to two minutes of every three-and-a-half-minute-long routine submerged, overcoming the body's natural urge to surface for air.

Much like an iceberg, the synchro support team is more than just its members. The coaching staff consists of Olympian and head coach Myriam Glez and assistant coach Lolli Montico, plus a choreographer, a doctor, a nutritionist, a physiologist and a sports psychologist.

What solidifies the experience, Williams explained, is that the entire staff is "all on the same page." Training, which includes out of the pool stretching and in the water acrobatics, runs from 6 a. m. to 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Bedtime is 9 p.m.

When asked what she thinks about during practice, Williams said she strives to keep her mind "crystal clear."

"If you're thinking about what's ahead, you'll be late," she said. Williams' business card lists her as "athlete, coach and performer," but says she can't afford to miss crucial practice time any more to coach.

"It's my dream job ... I'm a mermaid," she said happily. "I have no plans to leave this sport."

The USA Synchro National Team will perform for the public at 3:30 p.m. Dec. 20 at Campolindo High School's SODA pool, when the team will present their swim routines for the 2015 Pan American Games and International Swimming Federation World Championships. Admission is \$10. To learn more about the USA Synchro Swim National Team, go to <http://tinyurl.com/ly24chd>.



From left, back to front: Isabel Malcolmson (white cap, yellow lenses), Sarah Rodriguez (gray cap, blue goggles), Anita Alvarez (black cap, silver lenses), Karensa Tjoa (black cap, gold lenses), Claire Barton (center), Pheobe Coffin (black cap, gold lenses), Sandra Ortellado (red and white cap, white lenses), and Alison Williams (pink straps, purple suit); not pictured: Mariya Koroleva

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