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Getting in Sync for Rio

By Cathy Dausman



Photos Cathy Dausman

Breathe, and slip beneath the water's surface. Remain there and perform a gymnastics-like routine. Strike a pose and hold it. Stay focused. Stay in absolute sync with your swim partner's moves. Burst from the water and submerge again. And again. And again. Six hours daily, six days a week. All for the sake of one technical and one free-style water routine, each lasting under four minutes.

Such is life for Mariya Koroleva and Anita Alvarez, a U.S. synchronized swimming duet bound for the Games of the XXXI Olympiad in Rio de Janeiro this August where they will compete against 23 other countries in the duet synchro swim competition. But for now, many locals can catch these Olympic-bound swimmers practicing at Campolindo's Soda Aquatic Center.

The Rio Olympic website calls synchronized swimming "pool-based gymnastics" and "spectacle and sport" as well as "aquatic ballet," saying this women-only discipline has delighted Olympic audiences since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

Synchronized swimming is one part agony, one part ecstasy. Those on land might see athleticism, control, grace and power, but participants strain to take in enough air as their lungs and muscles scream from oxygen deprivation.

"You have to remember to breathe," Koroleva says of the mental aspect of their training. Although the hours are grueling and the athletes end up feeling perpetually tired, Alvarez says there is always so much to do. The pair willingly deprives themselves of sleep, family and leisure activities - for now, at least.

Koroleva and Alvarez arrived to train at the Soda Aquatic Center in the fall of 2014. Between daily water rehearsals, land drills (dry land practice), ballet, Pilates and weight lifting routines, the women were on a 30 minute break; Coach Lolli Montico made it clear they could only spare half that time.

Because her mother was a synchro swimmer Alvarez decided at age five to become one. The 19-year-old from Buffalo, N.Y. moved to the Bay Area three years ago, initially living with host families. She is leaving her East Bay apartment to prepare for the rest of summer. The swimmer has put it all on hold for now - higher education, a job search and family time - as she pursues the Olympic dream. Alvarez won't be alone during her Olympic journey, though, as her whole family - mother, father, brother and grandmother - is making the trip to Rio to watch.

Koroleva, 26, moved to the East Bay with her family from Russia when she was nine. She began synchro swim training with the Walnut Creek Aquanauts. The swimmer holds an undergraduate degree from Stanford and is two classes shy of earning a master's degree from University of San Francisco in sports management. Koroleva returns to compete in her second Olympics; she placed 11th in the duet event at the London games four years ago. Koroleva's mother, brother and

boyfriend will be her support in the Rio grandstands.

Alvarez and Koroleva have given their passports a good workout in the past six months. The pair has traveled to Italy (Rome and Savona), Germany (Bonn), France (Paris), China (Wuhan) and Rio. With less than two months remaining before their Aug.14 Olympic competition they move to U.C. Riverside and then to Puerto Rico for two final weeks of an intense training camp.

"You can't take it easy or coast (right now)," Koroleva says. After Rio both athletes will take a few weeks off and relax with their families. Koroleva plans to finish her master's and hopes to put her degree to work. She doesn't plan to compete at the Olympic level again, but Alvarez may continue to train. When asked if she would like to return to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, she says quietly "I think so..."

For more details, go online to: www.rio2016.com/en/synchronised-swimming, www.teamusa.org/usa-synchronized-swimming/athletes/Mariya-Koroleva, and/or www.teamusa.org/usa-synchronized-swimming/athletes/anita-alvarez.



From left: Mariya Koroleva and Anita Alvarez



Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

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