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Pair of German swimmers finding a new home with Gamecocks

By NEIL WHITE

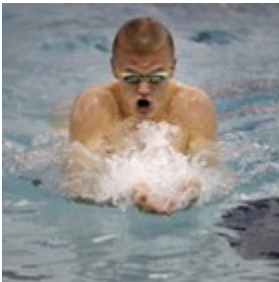
nwhite@thestate.com January 14, 2015

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A pair of swimmers from Germany, Kevin Leithold and Nils Wich-Glasen, are leading the USC swimming team. Leithold set the school record in the 100 breaststroke. Wich-Glasen owns the school record in the 200 breaststroke. GERRY MELENDEZ — gmelendez@thestate.com





- KEVIN LEITHOLD

Class: Redshirt sophomore

Hometown: Sandersdorf, Germany

Highlights: He is USC's top performer in the 50, 100 and 200 freestyle, 100 breaststroke and 200 IM. He has five times that rank in the Top 20 in the SEC this season.

NILS WICH -GLASEN

Class: Freshman

Hometown: Coburg, Bayern, Germany

Highlights: He owns three times that rank in the Top 10 in USC history. His season-best times in the 100 and 200 breaststroke rank 14th and sixth in the SEC.

Kevin Leithold remembers the transition he had to make three years ago upon arriving in South Carolina from Sandersdorf, Germany.

Being an athlete and a student while assimilating into the American culture took some time.

"The language barrier was the hardest for me. Once I overcame this, it was nice," Leithold said. "People are much more open here than they are in Germany. They are more friendly, I would say in general. My language skills have improved a lot. After the first semester, I was pretty much fine, especially after talking to people a lot."

Leithold has developed into one of USC's top swimmers while serving as a mentor to Nils Wich-Glasen, who came to Columbia this past August from Coburg, Bayern, Germany.

Wich-Glasen has made an immediate splash, assisted in large part by the advice and friendship from Leithold.

"It's great to talk to somebody without thinking about the sentences you make," Wich-Glasen said. "If I speak English, I usually think about what I say. If I talk German, it's just fluent and it's kind of relaxing."

The two also have found a comfort level in the pool. They combined to break school records in the 100 and 200 breaststroke on consecutive days in November at the Virginia Tech Invitational, where Leithold swam a 53.36 in the 100 breaststroke and Wich-Glasen followed that with a 1:55.98 in the 200 breaststroke.

Leithold, whose best event is the 100 freestyle in which he has the second-best time in school history, has swum in five different individual events as well as five different relays in five meets this season. Wich-Glasen, who's primarily a breaststroker with the fifth-best time in school history in the 100 breaststroke, also competes in many of the relay events.

USC coach McGee Moody likes them to race against each other in practice as a way of pushing the pair to better times. Leithold and Wich-Glasen like the competition.

"I don't know if the practice will make me faster, but I already feel faster in the water, better than in Germany," Wich-Glasen said.

The two were attracted to USC for the swimming program and the international business major. Leithold, who hopes also to study in Asia, has adjusted to life in Columbia, laughing as he says, "Go Cocks!" But having another German on the roster has been good for him, too.

"Of course, we support each other," Leithold said. "It's always nice to have someone here from my native country to talk about stuff that's going on in Germany."

The two had crossed paths in Germany at a national training camp during high school, but Wich-Glasen didn't realize Leithold was attending USC when the Gamecocks first began to recruit him.

Wich-Glasen also was recruited by swimming powers Ohio State, Arizona, Auburn and Florida, but he liked what the Gamecocks had to offer as well as a connection to his native land in Leithold.

"South Carolina was the best shot for me," said Wich-Glasen, who proudly notes that he made an 'A' in English in his first semester.

The Gamecocks (4-2 are getting ready for the SEC championships in mid-February. Leithold is anxious to see how he stacks up against the best in the conference after getting his first taste a year ago.

"I was kind of shocked at how strong the competition is and how many people went so fast," Leithold said.

Leithold said he hopes to swim for Germany in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He considers the 100 freestyle his best opportunity to make the team.

"I would say it is realistic," he said. "I have to work hard to approach the goal, but I can do it. That's my goal."

Wich-Glasen has the same goal, but he said it will be tougher to make the team as a breaststroker.

"It is hard to make the team for me, but it's definitely not impossible," he said.

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