

Breaking Through



Meitz, a senior, has been well decorated on a Big Ten and international stage.

BY TIM CARY

Special to Gold and Black Illustrated

Kaersten Meitz had plans for the summer of 2017. They didn't involve a trip to Taiwan.

Specifically, the selling and sales management major was looking forward to an internship with Frito-Lay in Indianapolis before her senior year that, when coupled with the normal offseason training schedule of a collegiate swimmer, was certainly more than enough to keep her busy. And when women's swimming and diving coach John Klinge mentioned the possibility of qualifying for the World University Games, she didn't really take it seriously.

"I kind of just brushed off when he said it, because I didn't think there was any way that could happen," Meitz said.

Spoiler alert: It did.

Everything changed for Meitz in May, as she made a clear breakthrough in the pool while training ahead of the Boilermaker Aquatics early bird meet.

"The two weeks prior, I somehow made a big jump in my training," Meitz said. "I was killing it every day, breaking new limits every day and going best times in practice. I knew that going into that meet, despite the fact that I was tired and not tapered, that I was going to swim well. I didn't think I was going to swim as well as I did, but that was a big confidence booster for me."

The result: Meitz posted significantly improved times in all three of her events and began to realize for the first time that an international competition like the World University Games was more within reach than she previously imagined.

The real test came a month later at the USA Swimming's FINA World Championships Trials. Meitz juggled her internship and training ahead of the meet in India-

napolis, and tried her best to keep her expectations low. With each week packed to the tune of 40 hours of work and 20-plus hours of swimming, 'It was a bit of a grind,' she said.

Despite the hectic schedule, Meitz continued her impressive swimming at the trials, dropping even more time from her previous bests and setting two Purdue long-course records. With each event, her confidence soared: Sixth place in the 800-meter freestyle (8:34.30), 12th place in the 200-meter freestyle (1:59.56), fourth place in the 400-meter freestyle (4:08.38). All of a sudden, Meitz was Taipei-bound as the first Boilermaker female swimmer ever to represent the United States in the World University Games.

"It was super exciting, and honestly, I can't even explain the emotion that was going through me," Meitz said. "I remember distinctly after the last swim, I was on the podium and just soaking it all in. Then when I got off the podium, I saw (Klinge) at the other end of the pool. I walked over to him, and he had tears in his eyes. We had a big hug, and that was one of the coolest moments I've ever had. ... Then walking back to the stands and having all my teammates come and they were all bawling their eyes out, it was such a cool meet."

Meitz's emergence as an international-competition caliber swimmer this year might have been unexpected for the Wisconsin native, but it didn't surprise Klinge at all.

"The things (Meitz) was doing in practice, I think I would have been disappointed if she hadn't done that at the World Championship Trials. She had really progressed," Klinge said. "She's always been a hard trainer, but she'd progressed to another level, so we expected her to do some really special things at the World Championship Trials."

Meitz finished her internship with a presentation in Las Vegas Aug. 11 and flew to Taiwan four days later. She capped off her whirlwind summer with a silver medal after swim-

The Meitz File

- 2017 World University Games Silver Medalist (4x200M Relay)
- 16 individual event victories in 2016-17, most on Boilermaker team
- 143 points accounted for at Big Ten meet, most on team

ming the preliminaries of the 4x200 freestyle relay for the United States. She also was a finalist in her two individual events, finishing fifth in the 400 and eighth in the 800.

"It was definitely a very, very challenging summer, but I think I grew a lot both athletically, professionally, and personally," Meitz said. "I learned a lot about myself being able to balance all those things, and I think I proved to a lot of people that maybe had doubts that you can do both and succeed at both if you put in the time and the effort. You just have to be very, very disciplined about it."

Upon returning to the States, Meitz was officially add-

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ed to the USA Swimming National Team. The momentum from Meitz's breakout summer has Klinge convinced she's poised for big things in her final year of collegiate eligibility.

"The experience she has this summer has given her a confidence that she can swim with the top-level swimmers in the country," Klinge said. "That definitely helps her going into this season. It redefines what she thought she was capable of, and gives her the confidence to go after more aggressive goals."

After sharing a podium in Indianapolis with swimmers like world record holder Katie Ledecky and Olympic bronze medalist Leah Smith, Meitz agrees. She said says her goals for her senior season are ones she never would have even imagined as a junior, but adds she wouldn't have set them if she didn't think she could achieve them.

For example?

"A goal last year would have been to final at Big Tens, and now this year I want to try to win Big Tens," said Meitz. "And that would have never crossed my mind last year. So being able to realize that I can compete with those big dogs is something that I didn't think I could do six months ago."

As a team this year, Purdue will be chasing its 11th top-25 NCAA finish in the last 14 seasons (after coming in 23rd in scoring this past March) and also trying to improve on a sixth-place Big Ten finish. Klinge wants his program to move forward in 2017-18 and is hoping to at least place in the top 16 at the NCAA Championships in Columbus, Ohio next spring.

One highlight of this year's schedule is a training trip to Honolulu over winter break, which means Meitz will be spending her favorite holiday thousands of miles away.

Meitz is known for her love of all things Christmas, most notably seasonal desserts (pumpkin, peppermint, triple berry, chocolate, peanut butter, etc. — pretty much any flavor of pie will do), and she spends the entire year counting down the number of days until Dec. 25.

"I'm passionate about everything I do," she laughs, "whether it's swimming, school, or dessert."

Ask her to recount a favorite compliment she's received, and the first thing that pops into her head is: "Man, you ate

that whole pie by yourself!" or "Wow, that's so impressive that you could eat all of that ice cream!"

Of course, Meitz comes by her Christmas spirit naturally, as her family's house in Waukesha, Wis., annually features a lighting display that would make Clark Griswold (of 'Christmas Vacation' fame) proud. And while she'll miss her traditional white Christmas, Meitz is looking forward to a tropical one.

"I'm just really excited to be in Hawaii with my teammates. At first, I was really hesitant about not being with my family for Christmas, but this is the one chance in my life I have to be with my second family at Christmas," Meitz said.

The idea of the Boilermaker squad as a family illustrates Meitz's simple philosophy on how to win in the pool: Have a good time and be a good teammate.

"As long as I have fun, I know I'll swim fast," she said. "If you enjoy what you're doing, you're going to work harder and put more effort into it, and the fast swimming will come on its own and when you're closer to your teammates, it's easier to swim faster. That's what I think."

Klinge describes Meitz as "such a great teammate that she would add a ton to the team even if she were an average swimmer," crediting her approach inside and outside the pool for her marked improvement this past May and June.

"The swimmers that have a great attitude, work hard every day, are really team-oriented, and then have this fourth component of (handling) little disappointments or setbacks really well without getting discouraged? They're the ones that are going to have a breakthrough," Klinge said.

Despite being a two-time honorable mention All-American, it's clear Meitz is ultimately an athlete who cares more about her teammates' successes than her own.

The year 2017 has unquestionably been a breakthrough year for Meitz. Will she and the Boilermakers be able to translate that improvement to a truly special 2017-2018 season?

One likely answer: Easy as pie. 



Charles Jischke

Success Beyond Silver

BY TIM CARY

Special to Gold and Black Illustrated

It was October 21, 2016.

Purdue was competing in its first swim/dive meet of the year, a dual against Miami (Ohio).

Fresh off a silver medal in the 2016 Summer Olympics just two-and-a-half months earlier, Steele Johnson stepped up to attempt his final 3-meter dive, a “reverse 1½ somersault 3½ twist free.”

And failed.

As in, fell-off-the-board failed. Smacked-his-stomach failed. Zero score failed.

Johnson’s reaction?

He laughed.

That sums up Johnson’s approach to his sport (and his life) in a nutshell. The most memorable moment in Johnson’s Purdue career to date, according to his offi-

Amazing Steele

- Swept the 2017 springboard diving NCAA titles
- Joined alumnus David Boudia as the only divers in the country since platform was added in 1990 to win NCAA championships in all three events during their careers
- 2016 Olympic Silver Medalist
- Only member of Team USA to compete in both springboard and platform events at the 2017 World Championships

cial online bio, is not one of the NCAA national championships he's won (and there have been plenty). No, it's a failed dive that gave him and his entire team a chuckle.

"It was one of those moments where I could either be angry that I finished third, especially since I just came from the Olympics or I could come out of the water laughing," he said. "The team's pointing and laughing at me, and I'm just over there laughing and re-watching the video with them, because it's funny. If you're not having fun with diving, you shouldn't be doing it."

"Diving is not everything. You can win the biggest competition in the entire world and you can lose the easiest competition in the world. (The important thing is to) not let it affect you."

When one sits and talks with one of the most decorated athletes in Boilermaker history as he gets ready for his junior season, it's clear within minutes that Johnson's perspective on and definition of success is different than most. In fact, he can barely say the word "success" without involuntarily and repeatedly using his fingers to make quotation marks in the air.

Johnson may be one of only two men in NCAA history — with Purdue predecessor and Olympic gold medalist David Boudia the other — to claim national titles in all three diving events (1-meter, 3-meter, platform), but he doesn't spend his waking hours figuring out how many more he can win before graduation, and he certainly doesn't sit around at night and count trophies or medals.

"It's been awesome to go to the Olympics. It's been

awesome to win NCAA titles. But what's more awesome is coming into practice every day and being able to love on the team and just be in this environment daily with them and do life with them," Johnson said. "Because at the end of the day, that's what's going to last, are those relationships. So, yeah, success can come and success can go, but success looks different for every person."

"Sure, I've been 'successful' because I've done certain things, but other people on the team have been just as successful as I have because they've achieved their own goals and their own accomplishments. I just want to love them well and help them achieve their goals. And by helping them achieve their goals, that's achieving my goal."

Johnson has matured to the point where he knows that his diving success can be a conduit for bigger, more important things in the real world.

"Success in the pool is nowhere near what true success is," Johnson said. "Diving is something I can use, right now, to reach out to people, but there's more beyond that. My body has a limit; it's going to have a point where it ends. But it's not like all of my success dies when my career dies, because I continue on, people continue on, and relationships continue on."

Johnson is coming off a busy summer that included not only a trip to the FINA world championships in Budapest, where he finished sixth in synchronized 10-meter platform and seventh in 1-meter springboard, but also his wedding.

After taking time off recently to spend with his new bride, Hilary, Johnson is beginning to ramp up training toward the 2017-18 season and with one eye on the next big international competition. He describes himself as a very patient and thorough person and knows it will take time to once again fine-tune and perfect his mechanics as he begins to work back into elite shape under the guidance of diving coach Adam Soldati.

"Steele has trained diligently for the success he has enjoyed here at Purdue and internationally," Soldati said. "He understands that each school year we build towards the championship meets, including Winter Nationals in December, Big Tens in February and NAAs in March. We gear his training accordingly, but he still enjoys competing alongside his teammates at our dual meets. The focus is always on being prepared to perform as well as he can and the results will take care of themselves."

Johnson believes his college competitions are the perfect laboratory for the world stage.

"You've got to treat every competition the same, so I use college meets as a way to test out different routines for when I get to the international meets," Johnson says. "I know NAAs can be the end all, be all for a lot of college athletes, but for me, it's never been the end all, be all. It's just been another step leading towards that summer's international meet.

"But I try to keep the routine the same and use my best routine at the Olympics, based on what I've tested out during the college season."

Johnson's approach to training may sound like a cliché but has proven incredibly effective in its simplicity: Do everything the best that he can, all the time. Of course, it helps being in the same facility with divers like alumnus Boudia, sophomore Brandon Loschiavo (Johnson's 10-meter synchro partner at worlds) and junior Joe Cifelli. The quality of talent Soldati has attracted to West Lafayette, most notably 2012 gold medalist Boudia, was a big reason Johnson became a Boilermaker.

"There is no other place in the nation that was producing this much 'success' in the pool and doing big things like this team was, and I knew I wanted to be a part of

that," Johnson said. "The way Adam coaches and the way the divers dive and the way people work, it was just very appealing.

"I think if you have good divers all training in the same place, it can breed better results. It's very motivating. If, for some reason, I want to slack off on an exercise, I see someone else doing it to the best they can, and I'm like, 'Shoot, I can't slack off now.'"

As a team, the Boilermakers men's swim/dive program equaled its best result in the modern era with a 13th-place finish at the NCAA championships in March and would love to score even higher in 2018. Johnson, who has a quartet of national championships and a pair of NCAA Diver-of-the-Year awards under his belt with still two seasons of eligibility remaining, is expecting big things from his squad this spring.

"I think the team we have right now is one of the most successful teams I've been a part of at Purdue," Johnson said. "I've been here for a long time now, but this team just has so much drive in training and so much drive outside the pool.

"Everyone's taking care of themselves, everyone's being smart, everyone's training hard, and no one's complaining about anything." ■■■