

DiRado emerging as Olympic hopeful

By **MICHAEL COIT**
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Not satisfied with merely competing at major meets, Maya DiRado is swimming well enough to contend for a spot on the U.S. Olympic team.

After breaking through with her best times yet at the national championships, the Empire prep record holder now at Stanford races again this week at the World University Games in China.

Swimming against the world's best doesn't change DiRado's approach. Already a veteran of five national championships and four international meets, Maria Carrillo grad DiRado stays calm in what has been an exciting season.

"I just show up and do my best. I can't wait," DiRado said.

She keeps swimming better. Best yet was DiRado's racing at the USA Swimming National Championships, in early August at Stanford.

Dropping significant time in all four events she swam, DiRado finished second in the 400 individual medley and third in the 200 individual medley. Those are the best of the six events DiRado has qualified to swim at the 2012 U.S. Olympic Team Trials.

"Maya swam as great as she ever has. She really set herself apart from very accomplished fields," said Dan Greaves, director of the Santa Rosa Neptunes, her longtime swim club.

So progressively well has DiRado been swimming this year that she wondered when the run would end.

"I was kind of waiting for something to go wrong, but it never did," she said.

A smooth move to college a year ago, with Stanford's rigorous academics and challenging swim training, was the first positive sign.

"Stanford has been really good for me," she said. "I love going to practice every day. I couldn't be happier."

The biggest change has been weight training and conditioning. Also helpful to DiRado's improvement has been the atmosphere of training with a college team.

"It's like low key in that we have a lot of fun," she said. "It's also intense in that every day it's really fast competition. It's a good competitive atmosphere."

The results have been impressive. DiRado helped the Stanford women to fourth place at the NCAA championships this spring. She finished second in the 200 IM, third in the 400IM and fifth in the 200 backstroke.

Staying at Stanford for summer training, DiRado developed even deeper reservoirs of calm and confidence to complement her ever-emerging ability.

"It's super helpful," she said. "I need to stay happy and relaxed because that's when I swim my best."

That was at nationals. Tops for DiRado was the 400 IM, dropping some 3 seconds from her personal record to set the world's 10th-best time this year.

"That was a really big drop in an event I'm already pretty good at," she said. "So that was a big deal. I wasn't really expecting it. That's the first time I've ever had a great end of summer meet."

DiRado already was among the nation's top swimmers at 200 IM and 400 IM a year ago, when she was picked to swim those events at the World University Games.

The games' swimming competition runs today through Friday. DiRado and the U.S. team have been in Shenzhen, China, since Tuesday, acclimating to the 15-hour time difference and preparing for the year's last major competition.

In her best shape yet, DiRado looks to continue improving her times.

Swimming for the United States in these games could be a prelude to competing on the sport's biggest stage — the 2012 Olympics, in London.

"It's becoming more and more of a goal every day," DiRado said.

You can reach Staff Writer Michael Coit at 526-5470 and mike.coit@pressdemocrat.com.