

Stanford's Graduating Star

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Julia Smit at the 2009 World Championships in Rome

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When Julia Smit first arrived at Stanford in 2006, she admitted to being rather timid. She let her teammates take the lead during interviews and didn't voice her Olympic aspirations for fear of possibly coming up short.

As Cardinal coach Lea Maurer put it, "she was someone who was laying in the weeds and observing what was going on."

But quiet observation didn't mean Smit lacked a clear idea of what she wanted for her future. Indeed, three walls outside the Avery Aquatic Center provided ample direction. There, Smit found the names of former Stanford swimmers who had won NCAA championships, set world records and competed at the Olympics.

"By the end," she told herself, "I want to be on all of those walls."

Four years later, Smit can consider herself successful. She's an NCAA champion, an Olympian and, most recently, a world-record holder. It's been a memorable ride, and as her decorated collegiate career slowly draws to a close, she is intent on savoring every last moment, knowing there is still work to be done.

A senior, Smit has Stanford in the throws of one its best seasons in recent years. On Saturday, the No. 4-ranked Cardinal wrapped up a perfect dual season by beating rival No. 5 Cal 167-131 to stay undefeated heading into the upcoming Pac-10 championship meet. It was a bittersweet afternoon for the Cardinal (9-0, 5-0 Pac-10), as it marked Smit's final dual meet on The Farm. She rose to the occasion, winning the 200yd freestyle, 200 backstroke and 200 individual medley.

The day was cause for reflection, even if Maurer wasn't quite ready to do so.

"Her work ethic and trajectory are inspiring," Maurer said. "She didn't come in phenomenal, but she is leaving phenomenal. I think USA Swimming would consider her the poster child for the improvement model."

For sure, Smit has emerged as one of Stanford's most versatile swimmers, and that versatility has helped her become one of the best IMers in the country. A 19-time All-American, she currently holds the

nation's fastest times in the 200 IM (1 minute, 55.45 seconds) and 400 IM (4:03.31) and ranks second in the 50 (22.35) and 200 backstroke (1:52.83). She's also the defending NCAA champion in the 200 and 400 IM.

Smit attributes her success to a surge in self-confidence, a swell likely brought on by a series of key events. There was the 2009 FINA World Championships, which Smit qualified for by setting the American record in the 200m IM. Or December's Duel in the Pool, where she set short course world records in both the 200 and 400 IM.

But chances are Smit's biggest dose of confidence came inside the Water Cube during the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Smit was the only active collegiate swimmer to win two medals in China. Though she did not participate in an event final, she still pocketed a silver medal in the 400 freestyle relay and bronze in the 800 freestyle relay after swimming key legs in the preliminaries. She soaked up the emotional energy the Olympics generated, drawing particular inspiration from watching Jason Lezak's classic finish in the 400 freestyle relay, a moment that continues to motivate her today.

"Seeing that relay was the coolest experience ever," Smit said. "The next day, I saw Jason and asked him, 'So, what were you thinking?' He said, 'I just knew I couldn't let the team down.' I think about that a lot. I want to be like that with Stanford."

Few would argue Smit's success there. This season, she was named team captain along with junior Kate Dwelley and senior Elaine Breeden. Together, the three have provided the varied kind of leadership the Cardinal has come to rely on.

According to Smit, Dwelley is the understanding one of the bunch, the one teammates can lean on when they're in need. Breeden, Smit says, is the good cop, the sympathetic one who helps others through tough workouts. And Smit? Well, she's the bad cop, a self-imposed moniker that pays homage to her straightforward, businesslike approach to training, and her way of teaching teammates what it means to be "Julia tough."

"To be a great teammate, you have to voice what (others) need to do to be champions," Maurer said. "You don't always want to hear it. Do you want to be held accountable on a Monday morning when you're tired? Every day, you have a responsibility to helping the team; every day is an opportunity to get better."

As Smit prepares for her final days with her Stanford teammates, she has not forgotten that responsibility. She may have NCAA titles, Olympic medals and world records, but she wants more for them.

"I feel like I've learned so much from my teammates," Smit said. "I really want our team to do well. I want to end knowing there was nothing else I could've done to help."