

DiRado Continuing to Learn and Grow

By Mike Watkins, USA Swimming

Once upon a time, Maya Dirado's time in the pool involved lifts and eggbeaters instead of flips and turns.

The Stanford freshman started out as a synchronized swimmer but realized after a couple of years doing "water ballet," that her talents in the water could be put to better use.

"I started with synchronized swimming at age 6, but I was terrible at holding my breath for long periods of time," Dirado said. "So I switched to swimming instead. I have loved being in the water as long as I can remember."

These days – not only for the Cardinal but also for USA Swimming – Dirado is definitely putting her enormous talent to good use.

She proved it last month at NCAA Championships when she finished second in the 400 and third in the 200 individual medleys in her first championship meet.

As she looks back over the course of her first college season, Dirado realizes that she has undergone a transformation – physically and emotionally – and has emerged a more confident, mature person and competitor.

"I recently saw some pictures of myself from when I first arrived here, and I look like a baby compared to now – and how I feel," said Dirado, who chose Stanford over Texas and California-Berkeley. "I have definitely changed over the past seven months, and I have grown up. College and college swimming at a school like Stanford make you adapt and grow for the better."

During recruitment, Cardinal Head Coach Lea Mauer saw immense potential in Dirado. Mauer was facing the end of the Julia Smit era and was looking for a suitable – and, if possible, immediate – replacement for the 2008 Olympian.

She knew she had found that in Dirado, but even she couldn't have predicted the tremendous season and NCAA results the Santa Rosa native would have.

"I'd be lying to say that we were not a little surprised," said Mauer, a 1994 All-American and U.S. National Team member at Stanford. "From the moment we recruited her, we knew she was capable of getting there."

"I'm not sure we knew if she was capable the first year of doing that, but it just shows how talented she is. And that has to do with how committed she is to the team and her sport."

Dirado said one of the reasons she made such terrific progress during her time at Stanford involved the variety of training, including weight training and stroke development, as well as the confidence Mauer and her staff had in her abilities.

From her first day on campus – as far back as her recruiting trip – she knew she felt completely comfortable and at ease with her coaches and teammates, which contributed to her quick adaptation and acclimation to college life.

"(Freshman year) was everything I wanted and then some," Dirado said. "I had high hopes coming in, and the fit with Stanford was perfect."

Mauer said she saw Dirado's evolution very quickly in her time on campus but still had reservations about just how fast it would show up in her swimming.

It was quite evident very early in the season, and it carried through Pac-10s and NAAs.

"Her development this past year has been one of the best that we have seen come through the program," Mauer said. "We put a lot of pressure on her to step up and take over for what we lost, from the two Olympians (Smit and Elaine Breeden) and six All-Americans. And she was able to take that challenge on and listen to everything, process it and she was phenomenal."

With her first collegiate season finished, Dirado has already shifted her training and focus from short (yards) to long (meters) course to prepare for a few meets this summer followed by ConocoPhillips USA Swimming National Championships and then World University Games before returning for her sophomore year.

Having competed internationally as a member of the U.S. National Youth Team, Dirado believes she is ready to return to international competition.

She said she is incredibly excited to go to Shenzhen, China, for WUGs, and that it will be a true honor to once again swim for the United States.

"After the season that I just had, I feel I have a lot of momentum heading into the spring and summer events," said Dirado, who will compete at meets in Santa Clara and Los Angeles prior to Nationals. "I will swim both the 200 and 400 IMs at WUGs, and I am expecting some really strong competition from the world swimmers. It will be a tremendous challenge, but I'm excited."

And beyond World University games and her sophomore season at Stanford, Dirado is already thinking about Olympic Trials, although she said she knows she won't feel incomplete if she never makes an Olympic Team.

But as someone who was entranced watching the 2000 Sydney Olympics and has been ever since, Dirado said she feels like she's heading in the right direction to put herself in a great position next summer in Omaha.

"It's still a full year away, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't already thinking about Trials," Dirado said. "I have learned a lot over the past year, and I'm ready to put all together. This summer's Nationals and World University Games will be a great opportunity to prove that I am ready to take the next step, and I am motivated.

"I like working hard, and it's gratifying to experience success and see that hard work pay off. I am lucky enough to keep improving, and I am excited to see how far I can go as a swimmer."