

# Julia Smit among America's greatest swimmers

By Joe Werkmeister, North Shore Sun

So many thoughts raced through Julia Smit's mind when presented a seemingly impossible question — What's the proudest moment of your career?

Only 23 years old, Smit has traveled the world as a competitive swimmer, from Brazil to Moscow, Tokyo to Germany. She's shattered records from her earliest days at Mount Sinai High School and never stopped through four years at Stanford University where she became a 26-time All-American. She won state championships, NCAA Championships, gold medals at the Pan America Games, the Honda Sports Award as the top female college swimmer in 2010 and she still holds two short course world records.

"Gosh, I can't decide," she says, "because so many things are so cool."

A few more seconds passed as she rattled her brain, ultimately settling on one unparalleled accomplishment.

Reaching the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

In the National Aquatics Center, better known as the Water Cube, Smit not only competed for the red, white and blue, she helped bring home silver and bronze medals.

"I think that's the thing that means the most," Smit said. "That's the one thing I always dreamt about when I was little. Just being able to say I accomplished that goal, I'm pretty proud of."

Of all the local athletes who dreamed of reaching the Olympics, who pictured themselves with a medal draped around their neck, Smit stands alone as the only Olympic medalist this area has ever seen.

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Julia Smit arrived at the 2008 Olympic Trials in Omaha, Neb. well aware of the competition that lie ahead. She was by no means a newbie when it came to the pressures of swimming in an event of that magnitude. She had already competed in one Olympic Trials for the Athens Games in 2004, the summer following her sophomore year of high school. At 16 years old, she placed seventh in the finals of the 400-meter individual medley. As she stood on the blocks before the race began in Long Beach, Calif., she said she would "freak out," according to a Newsday article the day after the race.

Check back Wednesday for No. 2 on our list of the 20 Greatest Athletes in area history. No. 1 will be unveiled Thursday.

The Olympic Trials are often described as more intense and more pressure-packed than the actual Olympics. And not without reason. In the Olympics, a third-place finish produces a bronze medal. In the Trials, a third-place finish in nearly every event equals a ticket home.

The room for error is nonexistent.

On the morning of June 29, 2008, the first day of the Olympic Trials, Smit dove into the pool for one of her signature events — the 400 IM. She had already began making a name for herself in the event. Only four months earlier she won the first of three consecutive NCAA titles in the 400 IM, while posting the second-fastest time in Stanford history. She had become the first Stanford swimmer to win an NCAA title in the event since former Olympic medalist Summer Sanders in 1992.

She entered the Trials with the third-fastest seed time behind Katie Hoff and Elizabeth Beisel. Hoff, a stud from Baltimore who trained with Michael Phelps, had already competed in the 2004 Olympics while only 15, and was quickly becoming the face of U.S. women's swimming. "She's the Michael Phelps version for the women's side," the announcer on NBC would say during the finals. Beisel, a 15-year-old from Rhode Island, was about to make her first major splash as one of the sport's rising stars.

The top three swimmers — Hoff, Beisel and Smit — all swam in separate heats during the preliminaries of the 400 IM. All three smoothly won their heats, with Hoff posting the fastest time.

Smit set up in lane three for the finals with Hoff and Beisel to her left as they dove in for the first butterfly lap. Smit raced across the first 50 meters with the fastest time, before Hoff surged ahead during the return lap. As they switched to the backstroke, Beisel grabbed the lead for the next 100 meters. It was short lived as Hoff regained the lead during the breaststroke. Hoff continued to pull away into the freestyle as the crowd rose to a crescendo, sensing her closing in on a world record.

As the swimmers turned back for the final 50 meters, Smit's only hope was to catch Beisel. But nearly a full body-length behind, it was too wide a gap. Hoff hit the wall in 4 minutes, 31.12 seconds, lowering the world record set by Stephanie Rice of Australia four months earlier. Beisel clocked in at 4:32.87, just under Hoff's previous American record.

Smit settled for third place, just under three seconds short of a spot on the Olympic team.

Two days later Smit returned to the pool faced with a choice. She had qualified in both the 200 freestyle and 200 IM, another one of her

signature events. But both races in the morning were separated by just one event, the men's 200 butterfly. To compete in both events would have required a Herculean effort.

While most events require a swimmer to finish first or second to qualify, the 200 freestyle provided a safety net — finish in the top four and qualify for a relay.

Less than a month before the Trials, Smit was a relative unknown in the 200 freestyle. That changed in early June at USC's Janet Evans Invitational. With 20 meters left in the 200 freestyle, Smit trailed Natalie Coughlin, who in 2004 took home five Olympic medals in Athens en route to becoming one of the most decorated swimmers in Olympic history (she added six medals in Beijing). Smit was unranked in the event. But over the final 50 meters she swam a record time to just outtouch Coughlin by .03 of a second to finish in a meet record time of 1:57.34.

At the Trials a few weeks later, the choice became clear for Smit. She opted out of the 200 IM and elected to focus on the 200 free.

Smit advanced to the finals on the night of July 2 holding the third fastest time.

Once again, she came tantalizingly close to qualifying as an individual. She finished in third place in the finals in 1:56.73, just behind Allison Schmitt (1:55.92) and Hoff (1:55.80).

But her dream had come true. She was headed to Beijing.

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Born in Santa Rosa, Calif., Smit lived on the west coast for four years before moving to Pennsylvania. It was there, under the guidance of her father Peter, that she first began swimming at age 6. She came from a swimming family. Her father swam and her older brother Mike was a swimmer as well. Mike, 25, would go on to his own superb career at Cornell and still swims competitively today. Along with Julia, he competed at the U.S. Nationals earlier this month. Their younger brother Kevin also swims, but not as much now since he joined the Coast Guard Academy.

The family moved to Mount Sinai in the summer Smit was about to turn 11. By the time she joined the Three Village Swim Club in East Setauket at 12, Smit was already on her way to becoming a standout swimmer.

"She was a very, very hard working girl, very dedicated and focused on her success and what she wanted to do," said Barry Roffer, the head coach at Three Village Swim Club, who will be retiring this summer after 31 years.

Smit posted her first qualifying time for the Junior National Championship at age 12.

As a freshman in high school in November 2002, Smit secured her first state championship by winning the 200-yard IM in 2:03.47, an automatic All-American time. She swam as an independent throughout her scholastic career since Mount Sinai didn't have a school team.

In the spring before her freshman season she competed in her first individual national meet in Minnesota.

When Smit first posted the qualifying time for the national meet in the 200 backstroke, she had no idea.

"Barry came up to me and was like, 'You made nationals,'" Smit recalled. "I was like, 'I don't even know what that is really.'"

The success quickly added up. By her sophomore season she was named the Most Outstanding Swimmer at the state championship at the Nassau Aquatics Center. She won the 200 IM in state record time and also finished first in the 100 freestyle.

Practices started at 6 a.m., followed by school, weight training and more swimming from 5 to 8 p.m, all part of a rigorous routine that helped her continually improve.

"I was very amazed at how she progressed in high school," Roffer said. "She got better all the time. When the pressure got greater, Julia Smit stepped up and swam really, really well."

Among high school students in New York, Smit was on a level all to herself. As a junior she won her third straight state championship in the 200 IM, blowing away the field by close to eight seconds and topping her own state record. She ended up just missing the state record in the 100 free. She went on to compete at the FINA World Cup in February 2005, where she was second in the 200 and 400 IM while placing third in the 200 back. Her second-place finish in the 200 IM came behind Kaitlin Sandeno, a four-time Olympic medalist from 2000-04.

In the summer going into her senior year, Smit posted four personal records that included two second-place finishes in both IM events at the ConocoPhillips National Championships in Irvine, Calif.

When the college recruiting got into full swing, it began sinking in for Smit just how talented she was. The flood of schools begging for her services took her by surprise.

“So many people wanted me to go to their school,” she said. “I didn’t expect so many people to be calling me and trying to convince me to go to their school.”

In the back of her mind, she always knew which school she hoped to attend. Her grandmother lived in Menlo Park, just next to Stanford in Palo Alto, Calif. As a little kid she always used to see Stanford and it stuck with her as she grew older.

Stanford offered everything she looked for in a school: great academics, an elite swim team and the beauty of California.

A week after officially signing with Stanford in November 2005, Smit entered the state championship in Buffalo a near lock to win her fourth straight state title in the 200 IM. At that point, she wasn’t just thinking state title, she wanted to break the national record.

“She knew when the time came to step up on the blocks, she had tunnel vision,” Roffer said.

Smit swam 1:58.29 to break the record previously held by Coughlin.

“I didn’t feel like I had to go all out,” Smit told Newsday after the meet. “I just wanted to get in a good place and try and break the national record.”

At the USA Spring Championships in Washington, Smit won a national title in the 200 back.

All along while competing at such a high level in swimming, Smit maintained a near flawless academic record. She was the salutatorian at Mount Sinai High School and won the Dellecave Award as the top female student-athlete in Suffolk County.

“I normally don’t set specific goals, but I really would love to compete in the Olympics,” Smit told the Sun after accepting the Dellecave Award.

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Julia Smit stands a statuesque 6-foot tall, or to put it in a more nautical term as she would like to say, “2 yards tall.” Her grand stature contrasts her humble personality. She once described posing for pictures after winning a meet as one of her least favorite parts. A story in the San Francisco Chronicle once described her as “...so timid she hardly talked to anybody for a month after arriving on the Farm from Long Island, N.Y.”

Julia Smit

She was never one to seek the spotlight; it always found her.

“I think a lot of the kids were in awe of her and how well she swam in practice,” Roffer said. “Basically she swam alone in practice because she was that far ahead of everyone else. When you have a person of that caliber on your team, she’s like an idol to other people.”

If Smit faced high expectations coming into an established program like Stanford, she easily surpassed them her freshman season. She was the Pac-10 Newcomer of the Year and earned six All-America honors. In the 200 IM she broke a 15-year-old school record. Stanford finished second in the Pac-10 and fourth at the NCAA Championship.

“She was the key reason for our improvement this year,” Stanford coach Lea Maurer told the Sun in 2007. “She carried a heavy load. If we needed someone to win an event, we penciled Julia in.”

She may not have been the most outspoken member of the team, but her performances in the pool were unmatched. In the summer after her freshman year she traveled to Rio De Janeiro, Brazil for the Pan America Games. She won four gold medals and a silver. Afterward Maurer didn’t hesitate to say she has the “potential to be one of America’s best swimmers ever.”

By the start of her junior season, fresh off her first Olympic experience, Smit was utterly dominant at the NCAA level. She won both the 200 and 400 IM in American, NCAA and U.S. Open record times at the NCAA Championship, capping her season as a seven-time All-American. She was named a finalist for the Honda Sports Award, which went to Dana Vollmer, a 2004 Olympic gold medalist from the University of California, Berkeley.

As a junior, the once timid girl had been promoted to a team captain.

“I definitely led by example, but I was also able to find my voice by the time I was a senior,” she said.

She served as captain along with Elaine Breeden, who combined with Smit to form an incredible one-two punch four years together at Stanford. Breeden excelled in the butterfly events and was a three-time NCAA champion in the 200 fly. Breeden traveled to Beijing with Smit after qualifying in two events, including the 200 fly. At the Olympic Trials she broke a 24-year-old meet record to become the top American in the event.

“We both had a lot of success together, so she’s always at my side,” Smit said.

Since graduating from Stanford, the two still train together at the university under Maurer.

As seniors the duo helped lift Stanford to the verge of an NCAA Championship. The Cardinals finished in second place in 2010, two and a half points behind the champion University of Florida.

The loss stung for Smit. Having never competed on a high school team, she relished the atmosphere of swimming with teammates and still thought her senior year rivaled her Olympic experience. But for all her individual accomplishments, that one team goal eluded her. The disappointment was eased somewhat later that year when Smit won the Honda Sports Award, which put the finishing touches on one of the greatest careers in Stanford swimming history.

“It was definitely a really good way to end my senior year, because I was disappointment that our team had lost,” Smit said. “We did everything we could.”

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In the weeks leading up the 2008 Olympics, Julia Smit’s mother Louise had her morning routine thrown out of whack. When she would go for a run through the streets of Mount Sinai, she found herself getting stopped every day by neighbors congratulating her and wishing Julia luck in Beijing.

Julia’s parents originally thought they wouldn’t be able to make it to Beijing to see their daughter compete. Accommodations for athletes’ parents for a hotel through USA Swimming started at \$9,000 for a week and topped out at \$37,000. The cost was simply too great.

Shortly before the Olympics, they received surprisingly good news.

The parents of one of Julia’s teammates at Stanford lived in Beijing and offered to host Louise and Peter for their 10-day trip. That left a \$4,300 round-trip plane ticket on Air China for the two of them as the main expense.

They got to watch first-hand as Julia helped lead the U.S. to a silver medal in the 4 x 100 freestyle relay and bronze in the 4 x 200 freestyle relay. She swam in the preliminaries in both events, but was replaced for the finals. Coaches have discretion to pick any four swimmers for the finals.

In the 4 x 100 relay Smit swam the third fastest leg of the four American swimmers. She and Emily Silver were replaced in the finals by Coughlin and 41-year-old Dara Torres. The U.S. quartet swam an American record in the finals, but couldn’t beat out the Netherlands.

In the 4 x 200 relay Smit swam the anchor leg in the preliminaries and she swam the fastest leg. But she was still replaced again for the finals.

“I swam as fast as I could,” Smit said, “and my coach was just like, ‘Julia, this is a learning experience. Now you have the experience of being in the Olympics, which is awesome.’”

Following the Olympics Smit swam some her best races. In July 2009 at the ConocoPhillips National Championship in Indianapolis she set the American record in the 200 IM. Her time of 2:09.34 was subsequently broken by Ariana Kukors in Rome at the World Championship a few weeks later. But Smit’s time still stands as the fastest ever on U.S. soil.

In December 2009 she set the short course world records in the 200 and 400 IM at the Duel in the Pool in England (a short course pool is 25 meters, while a long course that’s used in the Olympics is 50 meters).

Both records still stand today.

Following her graduation from Stanford, Smit faced some her biggest hurdles in her career. She didn’t consider quitting swimming, but wasn’t as happy in the sport as she had always been.

“Last summer nationals I think it was more of a transition type year,” she said. “I just finished with college and all my friends in my class and on the swim team were moving away and I was a little lost.”

This summer she had hoped to swim a little faster. At Nationals in her home pool at Stanford earlier this month, she finished sixth in the 400 IM, nearly 10 seconds behind Beisel. In the 200 IM she placed fifth behind Beisel and Hoff.

“It’s kind of disappointing but luckily we’re still a year out from trials,” she said. “I have a year to make changes and get better.”

Smit says with almost near certainty the pursuit of the 2012 Games will be the end of her competitive swimming career. She’ll be 24.

She said she plans to drop the 200 free this time and focus on the 200 IM. She’ll also swim the 400 IM and 100 free, which will allow her a chance to again qualify for a relay.

Before the Trials she’ll have one more big meet when she swims in the Pan America Games in Guadalajara, Mexico in October.

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Competing at an elevation of more than 5,000 feet will present a unique challenge for Smit. “I’m unsure how I’m going to react to that, but hopefully well,” she said.

Smit graduated from Stanford with a degree in anthropology and a minor in studio art. She hopes to work in an art-related field one day and she may pursue an art therapy program for a master’s degree. “Maybe work with kids,” she said.

Little will the kids know — don’t expect Smit to brag — but they’ll be learning from one the greatest American swimmers of this generation.