

LEILA VAZIRI: A RISING STAR

By Jason Marsteller

Life has truly been a roller coaster ride for Leila Vaziri since earning the 50 meter backstroke world title and setting the world record in the event at the FINA World Championships in Melbourne, Australia, last spring.

One of the biggest life-changers for the South Florida swimmer came when TYR inked her to a professional contract to allow her to devote her entire attention toward making the 2008 Beijing Olympic roster for the United States.

"I have been using TYR for a couple of years now through my collegiate career at Indiana," Vaziri said of her signing. "I really feel comfortable with them, and am excited to be continuing my swimming career with TYR because I have done so well with them."

The contract will allow Vaziri to focus on her ultimate goal of an Olympic gold medal.

"I'm so glad that I have a rare and special opportunity that not many swimmers get after their college career," Vaziri said. "I don't have to worry about the financial side of my life for now. The contract helps me on my way to my Olympic dreams of a gold medal."

THERE'S MORE TO THE STORY

To learn more about Vaziri, as well as to see some great pictures of the rising star, check out the July issue of *Swimming World Magazine* for a feature chronicling her recent successes.

During the process of producing the article on Vaziri, we had a chance to hear from Michael Lohberg, her coach at Coral Springs Swim Club. After asking him to answer the question, "Who is Leila Vaziri?" since that question has been on the mind of many of our readers since her breakout performance at Worlds, he provided a pretty detailed account of his understanding of Leila"

"Leila started in the SwimAmerica program in Coral Springs, Fla., at age 7. From the very beginning, her talent was obvious. She had a great feel and a love for the water. From age 9-on, she started to break club records at the Coral Springs Swim Club. She was a happy-go-lucky girl, always having a smile on her face. Her parents are wonderful people.

"Unfortunately, her dad died last year. They always supported her, and never had a harsh word for her after meets. All they wanted was their girl being happy and doing her thing. They totally trusted us in taking care of her.

"I took Leila in my group when she was 11, which I usually never do. She swam about three to four times per week at the time, mostly working on technique. The older, top swimmers took her under their wings because she was such a nice girl with a lot of promise.

"She did not work what coaches consider "hard" until age 14. When she turned 14 in the summer of 1999, I told her that we should try to make the U.S. Olympic Trials cut in 2000 because one day it would be helpful for her to know what the Trials feel like. So, we went up to daily practices with more yardage. After barely turning 15, she made the cut.

"Even though Leila worked very hard and focused and always wanted to do well, she never made swimming the dominant component in her life. Swimming, which she loved and still loves, never defined her as a person.

"Even though she is still an easy-going girl, she is tough as nails. Nothing gets her off track easily. She has the things of life perfectly in perspective, regardless if she loses (NCAA) or wins (Worlds). She just remains...Leila.

"Leila's technique and swimming style has always been so perfect, that coaches and swimmers from all teams here in South Florida stood and watched whenever she swam a meet. It was and is just a beautiful thing to watch her move through the water—like a beautiful piece of music. Coaches down here in South Florida knew that she would be great one day. It was always visible, but she just needed an opportunity to come out.

"During her college time, she had some rough spots, starting off with the transition of being a freshman, then with the coaching change at Indiana and then the death of her dad. There was always something that interfered with her progress until the summer of 2006. That's when everything clicked.

"She had a few good races during the college season, posting a 1:03 in a meet at Michigan. When she came here in the summer, we polished everything a little. At sectionals at Fort Lauderdale, she swam a low-1:02 to her big surprise, and from there on, she just got faster and faster and added more and more confidence.

"Leila is a person who likes to keep a low profile. She is very sure of herself as a person, and now also as a swimmer, but does not make a big deal out of herself and her accomplishments. She just enjoys the ride and is thankful that she has a chance to experience all of this. She is the same person as a world record holder that she was as an age group swimmer. If she makes the U.S. Olympic team, Leila will be THE backstroker for many years to come."

MOM KNOWS BEST

We also heard from Leila's mother, Lise, who answered the question, "Who is Leila Vaziri?"

"I remember teaching Leila to swim the summer that she was 3 years old. I would take her and her brother to the Holiday Inn at La Guardia Airport near our home in Queens, N.Y. I put those little inflatable wings on her arms, and over time with lots of use, the air would seep out of them, and she learned to swim.

"When she was 5, we moved to Florida, where the sport of swimming fit in beautifully with Leila's upbringing in Coral Springs. The Coral Springs Aquatic Complex was a picture-perfect place to spend countless sunrises and sunsets training outdoors 12 months of the year. Leila developed into a person who values nature, fun and friendship.

"Throughout those years, she never objected to and rarely missed a practice. The team atmosphere at CSSC was always nurturing, and we owe that to her coach, Michael Lohberg.

"Swim practice and swim trips actually were an outlet to freedom for Leila as the only daughter of a rather traditional Iranian father, who preferred to keep his kids under his close watch. Yet Leila's father encouraged her to enjoy and excel at her sport. He loved to watch her race and would say, 'Let's see what you've been doing with all that time you've spent away from the family at swim practice.'

"Of course, I worried a lot during Leila's four years at Indiana University about the pressures of being a student-athlete so far from home. She'd call home and tell me about walking to swim practice in the snow at 5:30 in the morning. However, now we can say that the lifelong friendships she made during those years and the leaps forward she made in her sport justified the hardships.

"Leila's brother, Ramin, carries on their father's no-nonsense, yet confident approach to Leila's swimming. That is why, when Leila failed to make the finals in the 100 backstroke at Worlds, Ramin said after her race, 'Why did you bring me all the way here to Australia to watch you swim in the middle of the pack? I know you can do a lot better than that.'

"He didn't mind at all apologizing to her for his harsh words after her 50 back swim.

"An outsider Googling Leila would probably think of her as the first Iranian-American to become a swimming world champion, and that is a noteworthy part of her identity of which she is extremely proud. But, always an individualist, she has kept swimming in the perspective of only a part of who she is.

"Leila takes all that has happened to her in stride while carving out her own path. No matter what happens next in her swimming career, it has been the biggest-and-best piece of her personal journey, which has only just begun."