

THE CHINA DRUG CONTROVERSY: WHAT NEXT?

SWIMMING AND JUNIOR SWIMMER WORLD

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**A SHINING
STAR AT 16!**

**WORLD
RECORDS**
Short Course
Meters World
Championships

**Stanford . . .
King of College Polo**

**ALLISON WAGNER
FLORIDA AQUATICS**

SWIMMING WORLD
35th
ANNIVERSARY



Allison Wagner:

More Than OK

Allison Wagner is 16, a world record holder and one of the brightest, youngest and fastest-rising swimming stars in the United States.

Allison Wagner and Kevin Thornton have this pattern, you see. Whenever Allison goes to an international swimming meet, Thornton—her coach—sets times he'll call her.

Wagner, a 16-year-old individual medley specialist, gets her call from Thornton at the set time and the two go over her split times from the day's swim.

Such was the scene when Thornton called from his phone in Gainesville early last December. Allison got the call while at the Short Course World Championships in Spain.

Their conversation, as Thornton recalled it, went like this:

Thornton: "How'd you do?"

Wagner: "Well, OK."

Thornton: "What did you get?"

Wagner: "2:07.7."

Thornton: "What did that get?"

Wagner: "That got first."

Thornton: "Well, then it's the world record, right?"

Wagner: "Yeah, I guess. You think that's OK?"

The conversation tells volumes about Wagner, one of the brightest, youngest and fastest-rising swimming stars in the United States.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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When Wagner swam at the World Short Course Championships in Spain, she broke the 200 IM world record by nearly three seconds—a record that had lasted for nearly 12 years!

Wagner set the world record—yes, the world record and yes, it's OK—in the 200 meter individual medley (short course) in Spain several days after she set the American record in the 400 IM with a time of 4:31.00. The 4:31 broke the old world record, but she finished second to Dai Guohong of China, whom she beat in the 200 IM.

"I was just really happy that I beat the Chinese girl," Wagner said. "I was really more happy that I won than about the time, I think."

A year ago, few among swimming's elite knew about Allison Wagner. She wasn't in the top 25 in the world in the IMs. She was among the top in her age group in the nation, but world records?

She says she doesn't know how it happened so fast. Her mother, Barbara Wagner, says, "Sometimes it's still hard to believe it's our daughter."

Yet, it is. A world record, an American record. And, the thing you notice first about Wagner is while she's come so far, so fast, it doesn't even seem to be... well, important.

"She's just very unaffected by anything," Thornton says. "The more glory she gets, the less it affects her."

"It's not like, 'Ha, ha. I'm the world record holder.' It's like, 'I'm the world record holder, but am I going to swim fast tomorrow, too?'"

Wagner sits quietly in Thornton's office inside the University of Florida swimming facility.

She is unassuming. No flair. No strut.

She looks every bit the role of a teenage schoolgirl—which, of course, she still is.

If you look at Wagner, it's hard to imagine a world-class athlete. If you talk to her, it's even harder to imagine.

"I don't think it's that big a deal," she said, "I guess it's all right that I broke the record, but..."

She stops and smiles an embarrassed smile.

A world record.

You think that's OK?

Since her family moved to Gainesville four years ago, Wagner has swum for Thornton and Florida Aquatics, a developmental program not-so-loosely affiliated with the University of Florida.

Each month, the group produces a newsletter that is sent to parents, and each month, each age group has a swimmer of the month.

"When she broke the record, she was more interested in whether or not we would pick her as swimmer of the month, as opposed to being a world or American record holder," Thornton

said. "She was almost lobbying for it."

"She was saying things like, 'Well, I've only got it once or twice.'"

Yes, she got it.

Unassuming. Unaffected. Hardly words associated with athletes who achieve dizzying success at an early age.

For Wagner, however, there was never really any other way.

She began swimming competitively when she was 7 years old and living in Berlin, Germany, where her father, Dave Wagner, was stationed with the Army.

"We adopted a policy early on," Dave Wagner said. "We encourage our children to participate. We would not allow idle time. We didn't care what they selected. They needed to select something."

Dave and Barbara Wagner's oldest child is Scott, 23. He selected soccer. Their youngest son, Mark, 13, chose football.

Allison chose swimming.

"I tried other sports," she said. "I wasn't really very good at them. Swimming, I liked. I don't know why. I just liked it."

One reason may have been this: from the beginning, she was pretty good. When you're 7, success doesn't hurt.

By the time she began swimming in Germany in 1984, she had basic skills, but little formal training.

Kevin McKenna, now a coach at Kutztown University in Kutztown, Penn., is a former swimmer for the University of Texas and the person whom Dave Wagner calls the "first real coach Allison ever had." McKenna joined the Army after leaving Texas, and when he was commissioned by his officer—Dave Wagner—to start a swimming program, he hadn't coached many kids Allison's age.

It didn't take him long to figure out there was something different about Allison. True, there was some ability there. She won races and was one of the best in her age group. A lot of young swimmers have ability, but Allison's was different.

"Her ability came with her listening and her attitude toward the sport of swimming," McKenna said. "She could change her stroke whenever she was

asked to, too. At that age, it's really hard in a lot of ways to coach some kids. A lot of them, they don't understand what you're saying when you try to get them to change something. With Allison, it was always immediate."

Adaptability might be unusual in a 7-year-old, but it sure doesn't guarantee a world record waiting at the end of nine years.

There was something else about Allison that started to emerge in her days in Berlin. We're talking work ethic, and McKenna talks about an ethic, a drive, a desire not found in many athletes, particularly ones who are 7.

A desire. A drive. And an almost blind willingness to train and to be trained.

"When it was time for her to get out of the water, if I wanted to I could tell her to do the workout all over again, and she wouldn't have asked why," McKenna said. "In this day and age, it's pretty hard to get that.

"I'm currently starting a swim team with 60 swimmers. I have some very attentive young swimmers, but with Allison, it was different."

A pattern had been established.

■
Still another pattern was developing, too. Dave and Barbara Wagner insisted their children participate in some kind of activity. Idle time means idle children.

That's one rule of the Wagner household.

Here's another: No meddling.

"Allison is good," Thornton said, "because her parents allow her to be."

Since she began swimming, particularly in recent years, her career has dictated the Wagners' life. When Dave Wagner retired from the military, the family left Baltimore and moved to Gainesville—in part because of the junior program there.

"The chemistry was right with the family, with the family life," McKenna said. "The parents made sure of that. Their moves have been based on coaching."

Typical parents, right? Overbearing? Pressuring. You might figure their daughter's career—particularly the world records and Olympic dreams—were the most important thing in their lives. You'd figure wrong.

A thread weaving through Allison's career is a notable absence of influence—not interest, influence—of Dave and Barbara Wagner. "Basically," Dave Wagner said with a laugh, "we saw that when parents got involved, it wasn't productive."

The Wagners seldom travel to meets. The family economy has never been drained traveling to live vicariously through their daughter. When the world record in the 200 IM fell in early December, the Wagner family found out third-hand—in a telephone call from Thornton.

"They try to stay out of the way and stay out of what coach is trying to do," Allison said. "They don't put a lot of pressure on me. I hope they never become that way."

Dave Wagner said the philosophy was simple. He and his wife never swam. They knew little about technique, less about training. Besides, world records and winning weren't the point.

"All we wanted was for Allison to feel good about herself and be productive at something," he said.

"The greatest asset Allison has is a great set of supportive parents," Sid Burkott said. "If we had to write a book on what we want from national caliber swimmers as far as parents, that is it—follow the Wagners."

■
Burkott picked up on the patterns immediately. Now a coach at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, he met Allison when Dave Wagner was transferred back to the states.

They settled first in Baltimore, where Allison began swimming for Burkott's club team and began to emerge as one of the top swimmers in the 11-12 age group in Maryland.

"There was always something special about Allison Wagner," Burkott said.

What seemed extraordinarily special was this knack she had for her training. Not just hard work. Not just talent. Lots of kids have talent.

"You're talking about a taskmaster, and a young lady who has a tremendous drive and will to succeed," Burkott said. "She wasn't the type of athlete that you had to beg to come to practice."

A deeper, clearer pattern was developing. Thornton talks about how Wagner is unaffected by success. She knows little of her competition. When it came time to swim in Spain, where she broke the world record, she couldn't tell Thornton who her competition was, just the "Chinese girl."

You ask Wagner how it felt to break the world record, and her eyes answer in an inquisitive look. *Obviously, it was nice, but don't you understand? You don't. That's not what this is all about.*

To listen to her coaches—to listen to McKenna, to Burkott and now to Thornton—it's just about living up to the expectations set in front of her that day. If that day's expectation was a world record, fine.

"She definitely needs the input from her coach," McKenna said. "She's just out there. She's doing what the coach tells her to do, and after the product happens, she needs to know if that's respectable."

Thornton agreed.

"She never thinks like, 'I'm going to go and I'm going to set a world record,'" he said. "We sit down and I say, 'I expect you to do this, this and this because you've trained here, here and here.'"

"Her response is, 'Do you think I can do that?'"

"I say, 'Yes, I do.'"

"She says, 'OK. I will.'"

A world record?

OK. I will.

"It's a trait that successful people in any facet of life have," Burkott said. "Whether you're a lawyer or a doctor, you have a vision, and I don't think that's something you teach somebody."

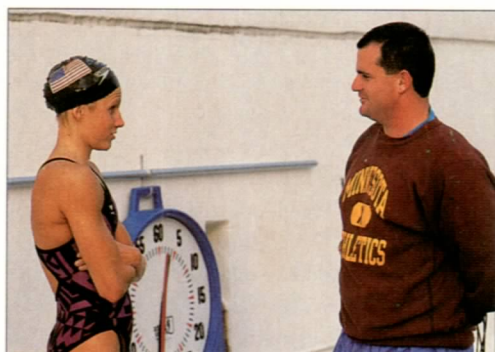
■
At the pool where McKenna's club team trains in Kutztown is a sign—a poster-board, actually. On it are newspaper clippings and pictures of Wagner, tracing her career from novice to world champion.

"She doesn't know it exists," McKenna said. "She'd probably be embarrassed."

McKenna uses the poster as an inspiration to his young swimmers, many of whom are the age Allison was when she began. At the bottom of the poster in large computer printout is a

HOW THEY TRAIN: Allison Wagner

By Coach Kevin Thornton, Florida Aquatics Swim Team (FAST)



Allison Wagner with Coach Kevin Thornton

MORNING WORKOUT

Long Course Meters

(Nov. 11, 1993)

4 x (4 x 50 free drill on :50
4 x 50 back drill on :50
500 kick on 8:45, descend 1 through 4
2 x 100: 50 back, 50 Free on 1:30)

3 x 1500 Cumberland Special on 21:20, descend 1-3
500 free
400 IM
300 breast
200 back
100 fly

Allison did:
1. 20:12
2. 19:28
3. 18:47

100 easy

20 x 50 breast pull on 1:00

TOTAL: 10,000 meters

AFTERNOON WORKOUT

Short Course Yards

(Nov. 18, 1993)

2 x (5 x 100 drill on 1:30, 1 of each stroke, 1 IM
16 x 25 kick on :25)

3 x	(300 intervals	on 3:45	on 3:15	on 3:30
	200 by	on 2:20	on 2:30	on 2:10
	100 rounds	on 1:05	on 1:10	on 1:15)

3,300 freestyle for time
Allison did 33:57 (the 1650s were 17:10/16:47)

2 x (6 x 50 breast drill on :55
1 x 150 breast on 2:15)

TOTAL: 7,800 yards

Allison's group swims 12 workouts per week during the school year. The yardage is an important part of the program but the required intensity is never compromised. Florida Aquatics has had, and continues to have, many great swimmers who have set a very high standard for workout performance.

It seems to be a big advantage for younger swimmers to hear stories of such standouts as Tracy Caulkins, Tami Bruce, Julia Gorman and Nicole Haislett, and the intensity with which they trained in order to achieve greatness. Our goal now is to try to rise to that level and continue the proud tradition of Florida Aquatics.

six-word slogan: "So, remember swimmers, anything is possible."

On Dec. 5, 1993, Wagner proved that true. She had finished second in the 400 IM to Dai several days before, and though she set her first American record, the voice Thornton heard at the other end of the telephone that day was not a happy voice.

"I think I was more focused in the 200 IM because I concentrated on my own race," she said. "I think I wanted to win the gold more because I got the silver in the 400."

Then, she called her coach and wondered if it was OK. *Don't you understand? It's not what others do. It's not how others are judged. They don't know what I can do. My coach and I know what I can do.*

"That uniqueness can't get spoiled," Thornton said. "I think that will allow her to continue to improve for maybe two or three more years. That purity, that unaffected way she is, that should allow for constant improvement."

It is a few minutes before Wagner is to come in for an interview. Thornton has spent the last half hour trying to explain to the uninitiated what makes a 16-year-old girl a world champion, what makes her care little about her competitors and everything about the task at hand. About training. About following instructions.

He shrugs. He hopes it has translated. He doubts it has. How could it? "I almost don't know how to say it, because I have no reference for it," he said.

Not that there aren't expectations. Not that she doesn't strive to be better than the rest. Those are just part of the expectations. She remembers what Thornton told her before she left for Spain.

"Right before I left, Kevin yelled out the door, 'Come back with two world records'—that was a goal, but my main goal for that meet was to get more international experience."

She got a world record, not to mention the experience. She smiles, and you notice she still has braces. A world record. Braces. She's 16, and the future—World Championships, the Olympics, more world records—seem as bright as her recent past.

You think that's OK? ■