

Annette Salmeen

In 1996, Annette Salmeen achieved the ultimate in athletic and academic success: an Olympic gold medal and a Rhodes scholarship.

Olympian On The Rhodes To Success

By Phillip Whitten

By any accounting, 1996 was a banner year for Annette Salmeen. In fact, the unassuming 22-year-old UCLA senior is going to have a tough time topping it. Consider this synopsis of her achievements in '96:

- In March, she made the U.S. Olympic team in two events.
- Two weeks later, she won the 200 fly at the NCAA championships—the first UCLA woman ever to win an individual NCAA swim title.
- In July, she struck Olympic gold as a member of the U.S. 800 meter freestyle relay.
- Back in school, she learned that she had garnered a coveted NCAA Top 8 award—given annually to eight of the nation's top collegiate scholar-athletes.

• On Dec. 7, her birthday, she topped it all off by winning a Rhodes fellowship—the first UCLA student to win a Rhodes in 23 years; the first UCLA woman ever to win the award; and, needless to say, the first UCLA Olympic gold medalist to be named a Rhodes Scholar.

The Rhodes, awarded annually to 32 outstanding American college seniors, affords these students the opportunity to pursue graduate studies for two or three years at Oxford University in England. It generally is considered the most prestigious award to which any undergraduate can aspire.

All in all, not too shabby a year for Annette, who sports a 3.93 grade point

average while majoring in physical chemistry, doing graduate-level research on protein structures, and spends her spare time conducting swim clinics for underprivileged youngsters.

But it's not a major surprise for those who know her best. "Nothing Annette accomplishes would astonish me," says Jon Urbanek, her coach in her hometown of Ann Arbor, Mich. It's a sentiment echoed by her family, friends, teammates, coaches and professors.

"I guess you could say that whatever Annette undertakes, she does very well, but she's also very modest," says Olympic teammate Sheila Taormina, who notes that

Salmeen relaxed at the Atlanta Games by studying advanced chemistry...to the astonishment of the rest of the team!

"She's quiet and unassuming," says her UCLA coach, Cyndi Gallagher, "but she's very self-motivated, an extremely hard worker who leads by example."

Dr. Todd Yeates, 35, an associate professor of biochemistry and Salmeen's research advisor, says,

"I was not surprised at all. Never before in anyone's memory here has there been a case of someone who has done so well in something this difficult (physical chemistry) while excelling in sport at the highest level. Annette's not glib or flashy, and it takes time before you realize just how extraordinary she is."

Adds Dr. Emily Carter, her professor in honors freshman chem, "It's wonderful to see a student so talented athletically who manages to balance everything so superbly in a very challenging major."

Salmeen began swimming at the age of 7 in Ann Arbor, where her dad, Irv, is a research scientist at Ford Motor Company Scientific Labs, and her mom, Trudy, works as a financial assistant at the University of Michigan. Graduating from a summer league club to the Ann Arbor YMCA, she

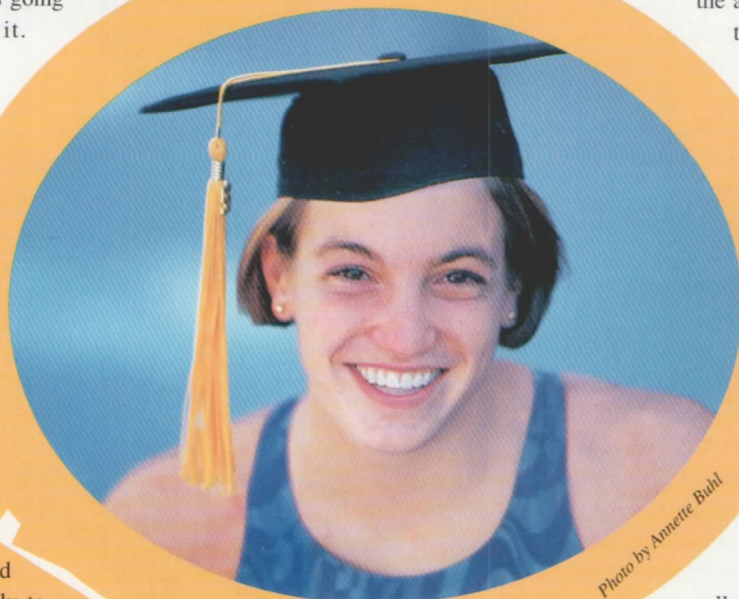


Photo by Annette Buhl

eventually joined Club Wolverine at age 11.

"Annette's been training with me every summer since she was about 12," says Wolverine coach Jon Urbanchek. Asked why she's the only girl on his team, Urbanchek says, "She's the only one who can handle it. She grew up in the Club Wolverine program swimming with the men's team. She's always been training with the guys, concentrating on distance and 200 fly work."

After graduating from Ann Arbor Huron High in 1992, ranked fifth in her class with a 3.9 grade point average, she chose UCLA "because I felt it had the best mix of academics and athletics," says Salmeen. "I felt comfortable with the team, and the sunshine definitely helped."

Looking back, Salmeen is very pleased with her choice. "Cyndi (Gallagher) has been both a wonderful coach these past four years and a friend who has helped me grow up. And Brad (Burnham) was great on technique."

Gallagher, for her part, calls Salmeen "a great person to coach. She's very patient, always learning, not the type who wants it all today."

That same patience and persistence has also brought Salmeen academic success.

At the Olympic Trials last March, Salmeen was focused on the 200 fly, but she decided to enter the 200 free, which came earlier in the program, as well. Almost no one expected her to make the finals—not even her family, who had tickets to the final day's events, which included the fly.

When she finaled in the free, she called her folks. So, mom, dad and sister Kirsten, 16, "stuffed our things in the car and began driving to Indianapolis," says her mother, who adds that they made it with "10 minutes to spare."

In the finals, Salmeen says she still was not thinking about making the team. "I just wanted to swim the best race I was capable

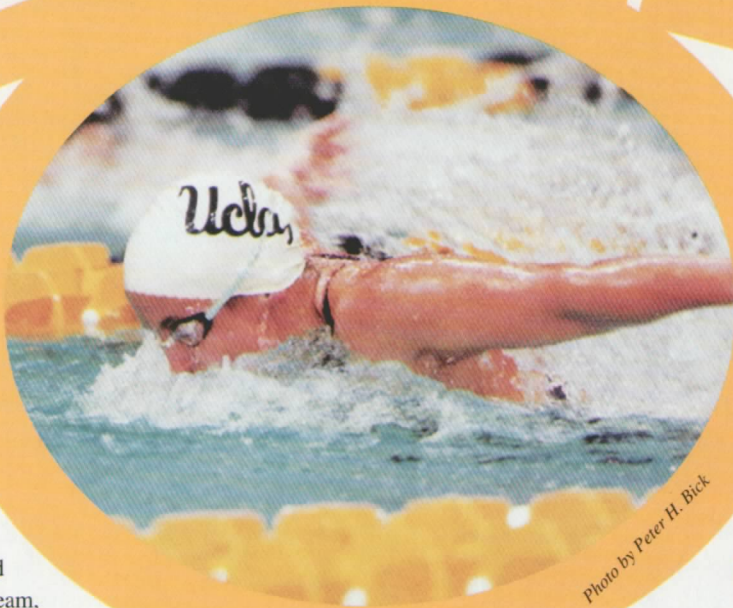


Photo by Peter H. Bick

Olympic gold medalist Annette Salmeen is the first UCLA woman ever to win an individual NCAA swim title (left) as well as the first UCLA woman to win a Rhodes scholarship.

of swimming, to stay long and relaxed and keep things in perspective. I was trying to swim fast and have fun with the opportunity to make the Olympic team." She placed fourth (2:01.18) and was on the team.

Says Urbanchek, "I was surprised when she made it in the 200 free, but pleasantly surprised. Annette is conscientious and dedicated, yet swimming is only one phase of her life. There was not a lot of pressure on her. Life would've been the same whether she made the team or not. So, she swam without fear; she had nothing to prove."

In the 200 fly, Salmeen says she was completely relaxed. "I was behind most of the way—eighth at the 50, sixth at the 100, maybe fourth at the 150—but that's the way Cyndi and I planned it." Salmeen brought the final lap home in 34.65 to touch first (2:12.39) with her best time by over a second.

Salmeen's Olympic gold came in the 800 free relay, though she only swam in the prelims. Still, she says she was "thrilled" to be part of that relay, and she describes the Games as "an incredible experience."

"It was such an honor to represent the U.S. The team bonded together well, and walking out before 15,000 screaming people at the Olympic natatorium gave me a rush. One of the best parts was seeing all those kids who were so excited about swimming."

Salmeen plans to continue competing through this summer with an eye toward making the U.S. team that will compete at the World Championships in Perth next

January. After that, she's unsure. "But swimming will always be a part of my life," she says. "I'm addicted to chlorine."

Asked if she plans on swimming Masters, she answers, "Absolutely! Masters is definitely in my future."

Salmeen attributes much of her success in life to the skills she learned as a swimmer. "Swimming has had a huge impact on my academics, life in general, and my overall happiness," she says. "It's taught me self-discipline and to focus on daily satisfactions and successes, even while striving for an ultimate goal. Sometimes big rewards are slow in coming, but I've learned to take each day in stride, to enjoy the little successes that come in workout every day.

"I've also learned how to profit from my disappointments so that my failures become lessons that eventually lead to success. And I've learned the importance of teamwork: I work with my teammates, both teaching them and learning from them. That translates directly into what I'd like to do in life. I plan on becoming a professor at a research university and would like to teach."

Salmeen stresses the importance of balance in her life. "Swimming is very important to me, but so is school and time with my family and friends. And I've learned that it's important to appreciate what you've got in life and to give back to others when you can."

With that kind of attitude toward life, Salmeen is sure to have many more years as successful as 1996. ■