

Web Feature

Kristina Hornback – Go FISH!

By Christie Ciraulo

Kristina Hornback of Swim Kentucky Masters participated in the Hour Swim for the first time this year, accumulating 1,490 yards. Although Hornback's total seemed a modest accomplishment compared with other swimmers in her age group, her swim was a huge personal milestone. Christie Ciraulo of UCLA Masters caught up with Hornback to find out what inspires her.

Kristina Hornback, 24, started Masters swimming in October '07 and by January '08 was in the water with her Swim Kentucky (SKY) team putting in her yards for the USMS One Hour Postal National Championship competition. "It was rough," laughed Kristina. "Half way through, I thought it was never going to be over. At the end of the hour, when my coach told me how far I had gone, I couldn't believe it!"

Kristina had swum 1,490 yards. And it was a gigantic accomplishment. Why? Because Kristina was born with spina bifida; she has been in a wheelchair her entire life. Spina bifida is a physical defect that leaves the spine exposed at birth. The vertebrae do not fully form over or protect the spinal cord. Surgery can close the area, but cannot restore normal function to the spinal cord. In Kristina's case, the opening was low down, causing dysfunction of the lower spinal cord and the associated nerves. Spina bifida decreases by nearly 70 percent when folic acid supplements are taken daily prior to becoming pregnant.

"At birth I was immediately taken into surgery," Kristina explained, "and the doctors repaired what they could. I was pretty lucky, because spina bifida can cause complete paralysis and huge mental problems. I don't have these issues." With this answer, one thing became apparent very fast. This young woman is a bundle of energy, and it is going to take more than being wheelchair-bound to keep her out of the water.

Kristina has been swimming recreationally her entire life. She also swam on her high school team at Sacred Heart Academy and joined the Special Olympics for one season. "The Special Olympics just wasn't challenging enough for me," explained Kristina, "but then my boyfriend found out about Masters swimming!"

Kristina met Justin Harris on the internet and they have been together for eight months. Researching swimming options for Kristina, Justin found out about SKY and "he's been a huge influence on me to keep swimming," she declares. "He can drive and he gets me to workout at least three days a week. I average 1000 to 1400 meters a workout. OK, some weeks it's more, some weeks it's less, but I'm pretty consistent." Ten minutes into the interview, Kristina exclaimed, "Oh, gosh, did I mention that Justin's in a wheelchair, too?"

Coaches Mark Gill, Tom Mester, and Geoff Thomas are way up there on Kristina's "good guy" list. "I have done things I never thought I could do, and I attribute it all to my coaches," she said. "I couldn't do very much at the beginning. The first time my coach looked at me and told me to do fly I thought he was nuts, but now I swim all four strokes.

"It's been my experience that some worry about me; some think because I'm in a wheelchair that I don't have the ability or desire--but not these three coaches. In the very

beginning they might have been a little worried about the responsibility: ‘Are we going to have to go in and pull her out of the pool?’ I think I have pretty much proven myself. All of my teammates are very supportive and look on me as one of them. Their cheering and encouragement means everything to me.”

A major goal for Kristina is to compete in the 2012 Paralympic Games. Like most swimmers, she does a bit of cross training. She spends a lot of time in a gym designed for wheelchair athletes and people with disabilities. Justin, who shares time in the gym with Kristina, just accomplished one of his athletic goals. He is a team member of Hill on Wheels, winners of the recent Division 3 National Championship of Wheelchair Basketball. (The team represents Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Center in Lexington, KY.)

“I spend a lot of time watching basketball games,” laughed Kristina.

“When I first met her we discussed her love of swimming,” said Justin. “She had won at the Special Olympics level rather easily, and I asked her if that was enough or did she want to be challenged. She said ‘challenged!’ It took some research, but we discovered US Masters. She is a constant competitor and is very passionate about her sport. One thing I can say for sure – never count her out.”

A self-acclaimed “picky eater,” Kristina does her best to live an all around healthy lifestyle. “Obesity is a huge problem for people in wheel chairs,” said Kristina. “I watch my diet carefully and count the number of calories I eat. I have to keep my weight down. Life in a wheelchair can be very sedentary if you’re not careful.” For Kristina, physical activity is an important part of socialization, too. “If we’re not in the gym or pool, we simply go for a wheel around the block,” she explained.

Long term, Kristina would like to return to college and eventually become a first- or second-grade teacher. “My parents made me start college, and I’m taking a break, but I really do want to go back. My mom is a school teacher, and that’s really influenced my decision to teach,” Kristina stated. “I volunteer at a nearby spina bifida clinic, and it’s really important to me to show children, that despite being in a chair, we can still have happy, active and productive lives.”

Christie Ciraulo loves swimming and would pick working out over competing in a nanosecond. She lives in West LA with her husband, daughter, and 87 year old mom, two dogs and the occasional fish. With three step kids, their spouses and six grandchildren all an active part of her life, she delights in being the babysitter of choice. Professionally, she keeps her mom and brother on track and on deadline in the writing of The Accounting Deskbook, a 1200 page behemoth published annually by CCH.