



Swimmer Profile – Britta O’Leary

By Elaine Krugman



If you have been to area swim meets over the past six years, you probably recognize Britta O’Leary. She’s the gal always seeded in the final heat of every race she enters, and she often beats most of the guys she competes against. Britta is *that* fast.

Growing up Tübingen, Germany, it was a foregone conclusion that Britta would become a great athlete—at least if her genes had any say in the matter. Her mother was an Olympic rower, and her father an Olympic basketball player.

When she was born, Britta’s parents were often asked which sport Britta would compete in: rowing, basketball, or...? “My parents always said, ‘Our girl is going to play the violin.’ They were just joking, but without me even knowing [what her parents had told their friends], when I was seven, I went to my parents and asked them if I could play the violin! I played until I moved to Miami in 2006,” Britta said.

It was obvious Britta had musical talent, but what about athletic ability? When she was thirteen, this young talent was on a state team for trampolining and also swam three times a week with the swim club she had been a member of since the age of 4. Britta was asked by her trampolining coach to move to another city to further develop her training, but Britta declined and quit trampolining altogether to focus just on swimming. As a result, she became an excellent swimmer, and qualified for Olympic Trials, in 2000.

In 2001, this Olympic hopeful transferred to Heidelberg to the Olympic training center as a resident athlete. She graduated in 2004, and then attended the University of Heidelberg, majoring in English and Physical Education, to become a teacher. It wasn’t what Britta really wanted, though, because her desire was to study sports administration; however, that degree wasn’t available at the university.

In addition to settling on her majors, Britta struggled to keep up with her studies while also training. Her coach only cared about her performance in the pool, though, so it was a difficult time in her life. Knowing swimming wouldn’t be her long-term future, Britta knew her studies were more important, so she needed to make a change.

Attending a university in the USA was what Britta felt she needed to accomplish her goal of earning a degree in sports administration; however, she needed a full scholarship to make that dream come true. After doing her research, this motivated student athlete contacted several university swim

coaches with an e-mailed introduction about her swimming background. She ended up with full scholarship offers from the University of Miami, Florida International University, and San Diego State University (my alma mater!), among others.

Although she had never even set foot on campus, adventurous Britta accepted the University of Miami's full scholarship offer, packed her bags, and moved to Florida in 2006.

Besides earning her Bachelor's in Sports Administration, Britta went on to earn her Master's Degree as well, taking advantage of a post-graduate scholarship.

Back when Britta was still an undergraduate, she met her husband, Michael, who was a graduate student. After graduating with his MBA, he landed a job with AT&T, and, in 2010, was offered a transfer to Atlanta where they currently live.

After moving to Atlanta, Britta returned to the pool to coach swimming, while looking for a job in sports administration. She started as a volunteer assistant coach for the varsity swim team at Emory University, and for income, Britta started coaching Emory's Masters Swimming team and taught swimming lessons at Dunwoody's Jewish Community Center.

After one year of coaching and teaching, Britta landed a great job with an international sports property consulting company, so she gave up her volunteer position. In her "dream job," as Britta described it, she got to work on Olympic and World Expo bids, as well as worked with various international sports federations.

While working full-time, Britta continued coaching Masters Swimming and teaching swimming on the side. After a while, though, Britta had the desire to jump in with her swimmers, rather than just coach them. Being back in the water gave her the itch to compete again, so she swam more and more often, and ultimately gave up coaching.

In 2014, Britta got pregnant with her first daughter, Emma, and decided it was time to give up the rigors of travel required by her sports consulting job for a local marketing position at the JCC. In 2016, Britta had another daughter, Mia.

"Since having kids, I usually swim twice a week in the mornings at Dynamo with Maria Thrash. I have a goal now to also go on Saturday mornings, and train three times a week," Britta said of her current training schedule, adding that she swims between 3,500 and 5,000 yards per session, with an emphasis on stroke work. "I definitely train quality over quantity. If I train only two or three times a week, I can really go and train [hard] every single practice. College swimming was such a great experience, because you race every weekend. I've always said racing is the best training for me, and before I had kids you saw me at every single swim meet, and that's what I really need. I need to race, because I'm not a practice person. I hate practice!" Britta laughed.

After a two-year hiatus from competition, due to having ankle surgery, it was at 2011 Summer Nationals in Auburn, when Britta experienced her first Masters national competition. "I did great in Auburn, and I thought, 'You know what? I can still do this!'" It gave me more motivation to train even more. I really had no goals in mind, except just to have fun," Britta said about her return to competition.

That motivation has stayed with her, because Britta has had an awesome Masters career to date, and she is still only in the young, 30-34 age group. (She has many age groups ahead to conquer!) As an example of her success, Britta won silver in the 200m Breaststroke, at the FINA World Masters Championship, in Budapest, last summer. That is an amazing accomplishment; however, it wasn't good enough for Britta, and she is motivated to do better. "I had only raced 200 Breaststroke once in the two years leading up to Worlds, and you need experience in how to pace that race. I didn't have that experience. I learned my lesson! I touched the wall, and I knew I could have gone faster. That

was upsetting, because the girl that won was only a second faster than me,” Britta explained.

Looking ahead, Britta has goals set for the next couple of years. In addition to preparing to compete at 2018 Spring National Championships in Indianapolis, she is registered for the 2018 UANA Pan-American Masters Championship meet in Orlando, in August. “My ultimate goal is the World Championships in Gwangju (South Korea) in 2019, Britta said.

Detailing her goals further, Britta continued, “I would really like to be an All-American in my age group. I made it again this year, after missing out last year. It really bothered me. My goal is to also win one gold medal at Short Course Nationals and one gold medal at Pan-Ams.”

For those who hope to have a chance at following in Britta’s footsteps—or, at least succeeding at their race time goals, she offers this advice: “I always tell people, if you can only commit two hours every week [to swimming], don’t go just once a week and swim for two hours. Break it up in one-hour sessions and go twice for an hour, or even go three times for 40 minutes each; because, it’s really about being in the water more often. Swimming is about doing it. My other advice is to try to avoid garbage yardage. I’d rather you come in for an hour and do your best swimming with good technique, and do the set right, for a shorter amount of time.”

Masters Swimming hasn’t just been about executing a quality swim workout or achieving her swimming goals, however. The fringe benefit of all her time spent in the pool and on deck at swim meets has been the positive interaction she has had with other swimmers. As Britta explained, “I love Masters Swimming because of all the friendships I have made. It’s amazing the people I have gotten to know. It’s the swimming world! As long as I have swimming in my life, I will never be alone.”

It is that passion for swimming and Georgia Masters that inspired Britta to get more involved with the organization. “I got involved with the Georgia Masters board about two years ago by asking Lisa (Watson) if I could listen in on (board of directors) conference calls to learn what was going on. Swimming has been such a big part of my life, and I think I have my parents a little bit as an example. They have been involved in the board and federation side of their sport as well, so I have seen how much of a difference you can make by getting involved, other than on the competition side. You can get involved and really make a difference in what a program looks like, and what is being offered to members. Getting involved with the board really has been dear to my heart-- to have a feeling that I do more than just pay my dues every year and compete. Hopefully, I can really make a difference in people’s lives swimming-wise.” Britta explained.

It is that enthusiasm that got her nominated and voted in unanimously as Georgia’s Interim LMSC Chair, until elections are up again in September 2019. Add to that her two degrees in Sports Administration and her work experience background, Britta is extremely well-qualified to lead Georgia Masters successfully into the future, in this writer’s opinion!

“If people are comfortable in giving me a shot at this or not will determine if [becoming the Georgia LMSC Chair] is going to happen. It will be a challenge for me, because I have not been involved for a very long time, but I love challenges. When I was approached with the idea of being Interim Chair, I thought, “I ought to get involved. I want to do more. I was definitely put on the spot (when asked to become Interim Chair), but if I don’t take advantage of it, and get out of my comfort zone, and do it, I might never get that chance again.”

I, for one, appreciate Britta O’Leary stepping up to serve Georgia Masters as our LMSC Chair. Thank you!