

CLUBS & ASSOCIATIONS

YOUR **PULL AND SAVE** GUIDE TO THIS MONTH'S EVENTS

Top athletes in synch with swimming, life

JENNIFER PARTRIDGE
NEIGHBOURS

Leaving a comfy bed — not to mention the restful oblivion of sleep — at the uncivilized hour of 5 a.m. only to plunge into the refreshing waters of a city pool half an hour later has to be a bit of a drag some mornings.

But does Brianna D'Amico feel that way? Not at all.

"I like the group of girls I swim with — they're a lot of fun and we have a lot of fun together," says the bubbly 18-year-old, during an afternoon pool-side chat in Calgary's Talisman Centre, where the team she has belonged to for the past eight years, the Calgary Aquabelles Synchro Club, practise their sport six days a week. "I also like the team aspect of being a synchronized swimmer . . . It's worth it (to get up that early.) It's rewarding."

Then again, all those early mornings are paying off.

D'Amico, who spends approximately 32 hours a week perfecting her skills, just made the junior national team.

"It would be nice, one day, to make the Olympic team," says the personable Grade 12 student at the National Sport School, who was recognized as one of this year's Calgary Herald Class Acts. "But we'll see where life takes me."

Alison McKenny, 19, has been a Calgary Aquabelle for the past 11 years.

"I saw the '96 Olympics on TV and I thought, 'Ooh, that looks cool,'" recalls McKenny, who first joined the club at the age of eight and now spends an average of 30 hours a week in the water, training six days a week, Monday to Saturday. "I've always really liked the water and I love to swim so I enrolled in the Aquabelles. I've loved it ever since."



Jenn Tregale, right, is head coach of the Calgary Aquabelles Synchro Swim Club. Behind her are two of her top swimmers: Brianna D'Amico, left, and Alison McKenny, both of whom excelled during nationals held recently in Victoria.

Leah Hannel, Calgary Herald

More importantly, though, creating synchro routines and the challenge of competing, of challenging herself to be the very best, is something this part-time U of C business student enjoys the most.

And make no mistake about it — this Aquabelle is certainly skilled at doing her very best. McKenny recently placed first in the senior solo division at a national tournament held at the beginning of May in Victoria, B.C.

As such, the soft-spoken swimmer, who harbours ambitions of competing in the 2012

Summer Olympics in London, England, will represent Canada as a soloist and a swimmer on the national B team this year, competing in such prestigious events as the Swiss Open at the end of July.

So what is it about synchronized swimming that is so alluring?

"You have to love the water, obviously," says Jenn Tregale, head coach of the Calgary Aquabelles. "You also need to have some artistic flair — and a gymnastics background doesn't hurt, either. It's almost like an addiction. You just can't get out

of it once you're in it. You get hooked."

Synchronized swimming, however, is so much more than just an elegant sortie in deep water. This is where Tregale's dedicated team of young women learn such valuable life skills as commitment, dedication, time management, manners and how to work with a group.

"This is a team where you have your own spot," says Tregale. "And if you're not there, there's nobody to fill it. It's not like you're a defensive player and any defensive player can be

in that position. You have a set part in your team and the team depends on you to be there every practice and to work hard every day.

"A lot of people have this misconception about synchronized swimmers," she continues. "Most people think they're just pretty girls who look nice in the water. But these girls are true athletes. They need to be able to exert the amount of energy that any athlete does while holding their breath at the same time. Try doing 400 metres around the track without breathing. It's not easy."

A well-known institution in swimming circles — the Calgary Aquabelles just celebrated their 40th anniversary — the group has been around since 1967 and counts such celebrated Olympic athletes as Carolyn Waldo and Michelle Cameron-Coulter among its notable alumnae.

A steadily growing, made-in-Canada sport (Canada was actually the first country to introduce synchronized swimming, known by the anachronistic title of ornamental swimming), the Aquabelles' season starts at the beginning of September and runs through the end of June (not including summer camps).

Neophyte Aquabelles are generally girls aged six to 11 years old, with members starting to compete as young as eight years old in as many as five to six competitive meets a year.

The time commitment is nothing to sneeze at, either. Typically, older girls swim from 5:30 a.m. to 8 a.m. or 9:30 a.m. if they can stay later and every weekday afternoon is booked from 12:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., with Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

"It's a pretty huge commitment," agrees Tregale. "It's like a job, really."

And yes, the Calgary Aquabelles are always looking for new members.

Love to be in the water? Do you enjoy swimming to music as varied as Michael Buble to James Blunt? That's all that's required.

"You don't need anything else," Tregale says with a smile. "We'll teach you all the techniques and skills that you need to know."

Sign up today by visiting www.aquabelles.com or call 209-2941 for more information.