

Illinois' finest is Stanford's newest swimming recruit

By Vytas Mazeika
Daily News Staff Writer

Posted: 08/03/2011 12:19:46 AM PDT
Updated: 08/03/2011 12:19:47 AM PDT

Her father was a captain when he swam at Stanford in the mid-1980s. Her older brother is a junior on The Farm. But for Haley Sims, the Illinois female high school swimmer of the year, her decision to become a Cardinal did not come easily.

"I was just really trying to find out as much as I could about each school," Sims said "And in the end it was a difficult decision "... but Stanford felt like home. It just felt like I didn't want to be anywhere else."

The 18-year-old was at Avery Aquatic Center on Tuesday to swim the first two women's events at the U.S. National Championships -- the same two events she won at the Illinois state meet in November. Sims didn't enjoy the same kind of success in the preliminaries at nationals, finishing 58th in the 100-meter butterfly and 131st in the 200 individual medley.

"Today was not such a good day," Sims said. "I was definitely a little bit off, further from my times than I would have liked to be. I just don't think I was in racing gear today."

Her soon-to-be coach at Stanford, though, was pleasantly surprised when she saw Sims on the pool deck. It turns out Cardinal women's swimming head coach Lea Maurer had no idea one of her incoming freshmen moved to the Bay Area for the summer to train with Palo Alto Stanford Aquatics in order to better prepare herself for college.

"It shows a lot of commitment to the next level and hunger for that," Maurer said. "So it's only going to help her be even more fit and more prepared for the fall training."

Sims is determined to make an impact as a freshman. But as a senior at Downers Grove in Illinois much of her motivation came from a pair of runner-up finishes at the state meet as a junior.

"That just added fuel to my fire and made me set my goals even higher," said Sims, whose best stroke is the butterfly. "And I would say this year was like a dream, almost. It sort of felt like all the pieces of the puzzle came together for me, finally."

It was also the reason other top academic schools such as Princeton, Northwestern, Virginia and Cal were finalists for Sims' swimming services.

The recruiting trips certainly added to the temptation to skip on a family tradition at Stanford.

"They treat you like a rock star," said Sims, who said her father Dave was not angry at her for the visit to Berkeley. "They want to make you feel at home, and they want to make you feel like you're so important and you matter, and they want you to come there. It's such a great feeling, and everyone is super nice to you. Everyone is always asking if you want something or if you want to do anything, which is a little bit overwhelming for me. But it's really fun."

The rock star treatment, though, didn't come from the Cardinal.

"That must have been the other coaches," said Maurer, who does feel good about the wooing process on The Farm. "What we sell is what you get. So I think she's going to have a fantastic time and career at Stanford. And I think she knows what are the advantages of a Stanford University experience.

"I think she's going to grow by leaps and bounds."

One summer in Palo Alto has confirmed for Sims that she made the right decision.

"I could see myself walking around, going to classes here," said Sims, who stayed with a host family rather than crash on her brother Burke's couch.

Classes start in September, roughly two weeks after Sims meets her new teammates. The goal this year is simple: win an NCAA championship.

"We're always striving for excellence, always striving to be better," Sims said.

Email Vytas Mazeika at vmazeika@dailynewsgroup.com.