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FIVE QUESTIONS

Moment of discovery fuels synchronized swimmer

Pietras as an athlete finds joy in executing difficult moves and as a coach seeing others 'get it'

By Heather Boerner
CORRESPONDENT

Gina Pietras has been swimming practically since birth. And with a mother who was a water ballet dancer, it shouldn't be any surprise that Pietras, now 31, entered her first competitive synchronized swimming event at age 5.

Since then, Pietras has been a member of the USA national synchronized swimming team and lived in Zurich, Switzerland, where she coached the U.S. junior national team. After retiring from the team in 2003, she says it's a natural jump from Zurich to Walnut Creek, where she lives and coaches the 11-12 A team for WC Aquanauts.

"The Bay Area is by far the best area in the country and the world for synchronized swimming, and Walnut Creek has consistently run a quality program since 1968," she said. "We have numerous Olympic and world champions, as well as junior world champions, national champions and too many local and regional medals to count. We're good because we develop young swimmers as whole athletes. We teach more than just synchro technique. We teach self-discipline, time management, leadership, teamwork and focus. We encourage excellence in education and athletics both."

1. Why do you do what you do?

As an athlete it feels magnificent to be able to boost feet first through the water to my ribs, make a rapid, flat split, close my legs together then spin 720 degrees all before submerging. The only analogy I can think of it is how good an opera singer must feel when she hits the high note perfectly. It feels good to move in the water in a way that seems impossible. It is a conquest of gravity and physics to master synchro. I also enjoy the daily practice -- drills and exercise help the body and mind to be in union. I love the drive to be excellent. It is a huge moving force. Most people never really know it and they are missing out.

I love coaching because I love to see others find the same enjoyment in the sport as I do. It feels good to watch a young swimmer try and try and finally 'get it.' It's the kind of moment that just makes my day. I also like the creative outlet. Music editing and choreography are a big part of synchro coach duties. Listening to and editing beautiful music and then making movements to not only complement the music but make the music sound better, like the music was made for the movements, is a difficult challenge but one that brings much satisfaction in the end. I also like to surround myself with creative and intelligent people -- and there are plenty of those in the world of synchro.

2. What do you like best and least about Walnut Creek?

I love downtown. It's safe and has plenty of restaurants and shops. What I like least is that it needs a bigger swim complex with more pool space for all of the aquatic athletes to have the training time they need to continue to be their best.

3. If you didn't live here, where would you live?

Switzerland, San Diego or somewhere tropic.

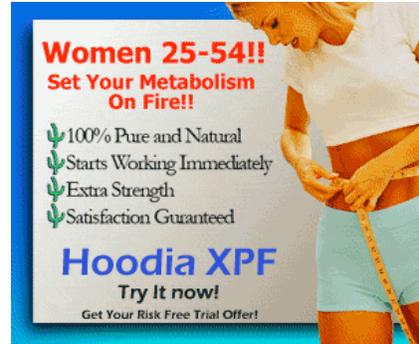
4. If you could propose one new local law, what would it be?

To not add any more laws. I think people can think for themselves and do what is right most of the time. Certainly we want to contain the people who display that they cannot participate in society without interrupting it and hurting others, but for the most part I think if we simply live by the golden rule we don't need any more laws.

5. What's playing on your iPod these days?

Everything: jazz, blues, my team's synchro music, rap, rock, classical. I like Johann Strauss, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Eminem, Etta James, Peggy Lee, Blondie, Chic, Gnaris Barkley, Tchiakovsky, Aerosmith, Pink Floyd, Biggie Smalls, Led Zeppelin, Mozart, Snoop Dog, the list goes on.

Have a suggestion for Five Questions? Send it to wjournal@cctimes.com.



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