

## **Swimmer Profile – Vesna Stojanovska**

By Elaine Krugman



What do former Swimmer Profile subject, Nei-Kuan Chia (March, 2019) and this month’s subject, Vesna Stojanovska, have in common?

Remarkably, they are both two-time Olympians, and they both competed in the 2000 Olympics, in Sydney. Nei-Kuan swam for Taiwan, and Vesna for Macedonia. Nei-Kuan also competed in the 1996 Olympics, and Vesna went on to swim in Athens, in 2004.

Vesna and I share the same January 20<sup>th</sup> birthday (23 years apart), so we have that in common, but she is a lot better swimmer, and got a much earlier start in the sport!

When I was little, I guess I wasted a lot of energy beating up on my sister. At the age of five, my parents were like, ‘That’s it! We need to take her to the pool instead of her beating up her sister. Maybe she’ll beat the water or something!’” Vesna laughed, explaining the reason for her early start in the pool. She continued, “I loved it. I kept on swimming, but my sister had a little bit of a heart murmur, so she quit. But, I just kept getting stronger, so I beat her up even harder, poor girl, but I kept on swimming. When I reached the age of eight, I went to a meet in Germany and I broke some European records... I won my first trophy— a big real trophy— and ever since then, I was a swimmer. I took it seriously, and I went swimming all the time. I think at the age of nine, I was swimming six times a week, at least. At the age of twelve, I was breaking all sorts of records for age 15 and under, in Macedonia. I made the Olympic B cuts at 13 or 14 in freestyle, and I was about 14 when I made the Olympic B cuts in the 200 fly.”

Vesna made her first Macedonian Olympic team when she was 15. In Sydney, she finished twenty-ninth in the 200 freestyle and thirty-first in the 400 freestyle. “The best part about [my first Olympic experience] was that I was so young, and I didn’t really understand much, and I just had so much fun. I’m a huge animal lover, and I ended up going to the petting zoo eleven times... I swam with dolphins, and I pretty much explored Sydney as much as I could. I had a blast! There was no real pressure, because I was just 15 years old. How much pressure can you put on a 15-year-old?”

“When you send me away at eight years old to travel and I don’t even turn around to say, ‘Bye,’ my mom knew it was like, ‘Oh, I’m not going to see much of her anymore.’ My mom cried. All the kids were turning around waving at their parents, and I just I looked straight, and I went straight, and I never looked back,” she said with a laugh.

Leading up to the Sydney Olympics, Vesna still lived in Macedonia. As she explained, “I went to an American high school in Macedonia, because my parents already knew they wanted to send me abroad to a

place with more opportunities. I had the means to get away from a country that was underdeveloped and didn't have much to offer as you grew up.”

Her swim training at the time sounded brutal. “My coach was very much a Russian hardcore school type of a coach. Every practice was 7,200 meters, every single one, no exceptions. They were all 1:20 pace, even the warm-ups. But we did a lot of stuff like 3,000m butterfly sets in practice,” Vesna explained.

Following the Olympics, Vesna's parents sent her to the United States to attend Pine Crest School, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where she trained under Jay Fitzgerald. In that same year, she won a silver medal in the 200 fly at the European Junior Championships and won the Florida State High school championship in the 200y freestyle. Two years later, Vesna was awarded an academic and sports scholarship at Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) and moved to Atlanta where she studied aerospace engineering and trained for the 2004 Olympics. Either one of those would be difficult on their own, but the combination of the two—and living in a new city in a foreign country—proved to be quite a handful for this studious Olympian.

Those days leading up to the 2004 Olympics in Athens were intense. A typical school day at Georgia Tech started with her waking up at 5:00am for a ninety-minute workout with the swim team. She would then hurry off to classes. Afternoon practice started at 3:30 pm and lasted until 5:30 or 6:00 pm. Vesna would then have a lab that started at 6:30 pm or 7:00 pm, so she was unable to do dryland training with her teammates. Lab often didn't finish up until 10:00 pm, and then she would go home and study. Eight hours of sleep was not an option. To catch up on sleep, she said, “I was good about falling asleep at any time anywhere, so if I did have two hours during the day, I would fall asleep on any chair on campus. I would just put my head down, and I was asleep, that's it!”

Following her sophomore year at Georgia Tech, Vesna competed in her second Olympics and swam the 200m fly, in addition to the 200m and 400m freestyle. Macedonia sent Vesna to the Olympics without the coach she had been training with since her junior year of high school in the U.S.A. Instead, during the month leading up to the competition, she had to train in Athens with an assigned coach she didn't train with, which was difficult for her. The results were not good, according to Vesna. “In Athens, it was a little different. There was a lot of politics involved and I didn't do my best times there. I was expected to make finals, and I didn't,” she said about her second Olympic experience, which was not nearly as enjoyable as her first Olympics.

After the Olympics, Vesna returned to Georgia Tech to complete her bachelor's degree and swim for the Yellow Jackets. At the same time, she developed painful symptoms that ultimately forced her to quit swimming and become physically inactive. Her doctors weren't sure what was causing her symptoms, and it took seven years of chronic pain for her to receive a confirmed diagnosis of Lupus, an autoimmune disease. (Lupus is notoriously difficult to diagnose due to the crossover of symptoms with other autoimmune diseases.)

In all, Vesna suffered through a ten-year battle with the disease. During her illness, she persevered and graduated with her bachelor's degree in just four years when most students studying aerospace engineering take five years to complete their degrees. Vesna went on to earn a master's degree and started working towards a PhD; however, she did not complete the program due to her health.

It was during her pregnancy with her one-year-old daughter, Viktorija, that Vesna went into remission, and the lupus has stayed in remission ever since. When she was five months pregnant, Vesna started swimming again and joined U.S. Masters Swimming.

As Vesna explained, “When I got pregnant, I was terrified of the lupus and losing the baby, because [the doctors] had told me actually that I could never even get pregnant. I told myself that I had to start doing something besides just lying in bed to get healthy. I had a breakout (a rash caused by Lupus) the first month, but after that I decided to just start swimming slowly, maybe once or twice a week, and then moved it up. I said, ‘Wait, I'm handling this just fine.’ I started swimming every day until I realized it had been six months,

and I had been in remission. After that I just kept swimming, and when Viktorija was born, I had gained 92 pounds with her.”

During her pregnancy, Vesna had been traveling with her husband a lot, but was inactive otherwise. After the baby was born, she made it her goal to lose the weight. In the first ten months, she swam daily and lost 77 pounds.

Vesna and her husband, Greg, are hoping for another baby; so, her Masters Swimming goals will depend on whether they are successful. “I took a little bit of a break, but I am going to get back into it. I am looking at Nationals. I’m in a new category, I’m 35. It’s a tough one. It’s one of the hardest ones, because everyone has already had their babies and are back into training. If I don’t get pregnant by then, I am going to do (USMS Spring) Nationals. If I do (get pregnant), I will have to take another break,” she explained. Meanwhile, it was a bit of an attitude adjustment for the Olympian when she looked at the race clock at meets over the past year. “There are times I’m like, ‘Why am I’m going so slow?’ because I expect to go back to my (Olympic) racing times. But then, I’m like, ‘Wait, I’m 35, and I just had a baby, so it’s not going to happen.’”

Georgia Masters records are falling, though, now that Vesna is on the scene. After less than one year back in swimming, she broke state records in the 30-34 age group for short course meters 200, 400, and 800 free, as well as 200 fly.

Now that Vesna has aged up to the 35-39 age group, the two-time Olympian has her sights set on adding her name to more state records. “I swim mainly to lose weight, but I realize that once I get in the pool, I don’t know how to train for health. It just doesn’t work like that. All I know how to do is race! Competing, the records seemed so far away until when, one day, I was breaking them all. I was like, ‘Oh yay! Great! Now I’ll go for the records that are for 35-39, so those are pretty much my goals,” she said.

In addition to breaking state records, Vesna has a long-term goal (after having another baby) to compete on relays with Georgia Masters Chair, Britta O’Leary, and break a World Record.

In the meantime, while trying to get pregnant again, Vesna is back in training, writes workouts for the Masters group at her YMCA in Newnan, and gives private swim lessons. In addition, she is enjoying her Masters experience of training and competing at meets with swimmers of all ages—a very different experience than her Olympic training. Asked what she likes about Masters, Vesna replied, “All these older people, like in their 60’s and 70’s—and even more—still swimming. That gives you a huge happiness seeing them, and being like— I can be like that, and I want to be like that. I want to swim my whole life and stay healthy. Those swimmers can be very inspiring.”