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A diver and her dream: South Milwaukee's Allison Osell

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SOUTH MILWAUKEE -- South Milwaukee's Allison Osell remembers clearly when she decided she was tired of being a mediocre diver. She did it with a smile.

She was coming off a sophomore year in which, yet again, she had finished 11th in sectional diving competition with a score in the low 300's-- far off both the place and score she needed to be even considered worthy of a place in the state meet. It was her second year in a row finishing 11th at sectionals.

Rather than be discouraged, she looked inward and found that diving -- a sport she embraced reluctantly at first -- was something she truly enjoyed.

"I decided I really liked diving," she said in a recent interview at the South Milwaukee pool. "I wanted to get serious about it. I guess I just tried to work harder than anyone in the state -- that was my mindset."

Saturday will find Osell in a familiar, if not entirely predictable from two years ago, place: the UW Natatorium, competing with the state's best divers at the Division 1 state meet.

Last year, after a solid year's worth of practice and hard work, Osell finished 13th at state, scoring points for her team from South Milwaukee, which by enrollment is one of the smallest programs in Division 1.

This year, she's seeded 10th, and isn't shy about her goal for this year's state meet: a spot on the podium, where the event's top six finishers are recognized in front of the UW Natatorium crowd.

Like many top-tier divers, Osell fell into the sport of diving after competing in gymnastics as a youngster. But all of those tumbles and dismounts took a toll on her body, and she switched over to diving -- a sport her mom had competed in at high school.

She hated it.

"After the first day of practice, I told my mom, 'I'm never going back,'" she said.

But she kept at it, and following her sophomore-year revelation, began training at the highly regarded Schroeder Aquatic Center diving program. She gained more confidence, tried more difficult dives, and found her scores and places at dive meets headed upward. Her third-place finish at last year's Greenfield sectional meet got her into the state meet, and she ended up 13th -- a solid showing for her first meet at the Nat, which can be an unnerving place to compete for first-time participants.

"I tried to tell myself -- it's just like any other meet," she said.

South Milwaukee head coach Sarah Nowak said Osell's status as a team captain for the Rockets is no accident -- she's looked up to by younger competitors on the team, and leads by example. When she needs a break from diving, you can find her training in the pool with her swim teammates, as she often takes part in junior varsity meets for the team by swimming on relays.

Nowak notes that Osell has broken, and re-broken, the South Milwaukee school record for both 6- and 11-meet dives at nearly every meet she's been at this year.

"She's very goal-oriented," Nowak said. "She's one of those who can have fun, but she is very determined to accomplish what she wants to accomplish."

Osell is debating whether or not to compete in college. She is considering studying physical therapy in college, with the well-regarded program at Carroll University in Waukesha on her list of schools to consider.

But come Saturday, she'll be hitting the boards, and competing against one of the deepest diving fields in recent state-meet history. Four of the top six finishers from last year's state meet return, as do 11 of the divers that, along with Osell, placed at the state meet.

For Osell, the key to success is remembering why she embraced the sport two years ago.

"Do good dives and have fun," she said. "That's what it really comes down to for me. My goal is to go there and do the best dives I can. If that's on the podium, great. If not, I just want to be content with my meet."