

# In the water, Cook cooks: Fast times, Catholicism, motivate local swimmer

By Chris Burke

Seton School swim phenom Nevin Cook has one light-hearted request for his teammates: Just be patient.

"They're all very supportive, like, 'When are you going to the Olympics?'" Cook said chuckling. "And I always tell them, 'I'm trying, I'm trying.'"

The Seton swimmers may be jumping the gun — if only slightly.

Cook recently competed in the U.S.A. Senior Nationals, and he anticipates a trip to the country's 2008 Olympic Trials this summer and could contend for a spot at the 2012 Games.

Putting that on the back burner for a moment, though, it is still easy to see why Cook's teammates maintain such high hopes.

Cook, now a senior, has demolished the Seton record books. He is a three-time National Catholic High School breaststroke champion and was The Washington Post's Independent School Swimmer of the Year in 2007.

In short, Cook, who lives in Catlett but commutes to the Manassas private school, is one of the best that Fauquier County has ever produced.

"He's the top swimmer in the whole area," Seton coach Jim Koehr said.

To wit: Cook's best 200-yard IM time of 1:51.87 is nearly five seconds better than the current VIS state record, and his top 100-yard breaststroke time of 56.7 would have won the public school AAA state title by more than a second in 2007.

"He's just a tremendous, tremendous swimmer," Koehr added. "He is something to see."

It is easy to locate Cook in the pool, because he's usually cruising casually well out in front of his competition. Throughout Seton's regular season, there has been nary a local swimmer to challenge him.

Koehr does not even swim Cook in his best events — the breaststroke and individual medleys — because of the substantial margin of victories. "It's no fun," Koehr said.

Exactly what sort of domination are we talking about here? Think Secretariat in

the '73 Belmont.

"It's a pretty cool feeling, I really don't even know how to describe it," said Cook of his proficiency for lapping the competition. "I think it makes me go even faster because it's like my little moment to shine."

Even while stomping his opponents, no one would describe Cook as cocky. He maintains a strong humility amid his desire.

Cook stressed that swimming for Seton is important for him, even as his schedule with the prestigious Manassas-based QDD Swim Team remains hectic.

On Monday mornings, Cook hits QDD practice, then glides to Seton practice, all before school starts.

His presence at the smaller venue cannot be overstated. "Kids can see 'Oh man, this is what it's supposed to look like,'" Koehr said.

One interesting Seton subplot persists. As Cook has rewritten the school's swimming annals, he's often topped marks set by Koehr's son, Kevin.

Kevin, now a sophomore on Virginia Tech's team, is clinging to his few remaining record times. "I'm pretty sure that Nevin's going to be taking down most all of my records," Kevin said. "I don't think he'll take my 100 back records, that's my best event....I hope I at least have that one by the end of the year."

Not that there are any hard feelings there. Kevin actually helped pave the way for Cook's future.

As Cook's career continued to take off, more and more colleges took notice. Notre Dame leapt to the forefront.

Cook wound up at Seton in seventh grade, fulfilling his parents' wishes that he receive a top-notch education and learn more about his Catholic upbringing.

Naturally, when recruiting began, Cook gravitated toward the stellar Catholic tradition that Notre Dame provided.

But Kevin Koehr kept placing the idea of Virginia Tech in Cook's ear. "I don't think he had any really serious thoughts about coming to Tech early on," said Kevin, also a product of QDD's program.

Eventually, Cook began to listen. The Hokies are an up-and-coming Atlantic Coast Conference power, possibly even a conference title contender in 2008. There is also a golden chance for Cook to slide right into Virginia Tech's lineup as a freshman.

The team, the location and the opportunity all pointed Cook to Virginia Tech. All he had to do then was ensure that his religious pursuits and Hokie swimming would not conflict.

"At some schools, they don't really like people focusing on religion, but my faith is important to me, so if my faith is going to get in the way of my swimming, I'm going to pick my faith," Cook said. "The Virginia Tech coach said no problem."

So Cook decided to join Koehr in Blackburg next season.

And there's no question that Virginia Tech's team will be better for it.

"I'm sure Nevin Cook will be an ACC champion as soon as he gets here; he has the potential to do it," Kevin said. "I can see Nevin being a finalist at NAAs."

He still has his eyes set on being a finalist prior to that.

First and foremost are the Virginia Independent Schools state championships. Last season, Cook participated in two relays and two individual events for Seton at states.

In both individual events — the 200 IM and the 100 breaststroke — Cook ran into Stuart Ferguson of Collegiate High in Richmond.

Ferguson, who earlier in January won a gold medal for the U.S. National Junior Team at the Victorian Championships in Australia, bested Cook both times.

The losses served as a not-so-quiet reminder that, no matter how good you are, you can always get better.

"The one thing I've learned from swimming is to be happy, but never be satisfied," Cook said.

If that sounds like the talk of a future Olympian, Cook can only hope the assumption is right.

Cook finished third in the breaststroke at Junior Nationals last March, and held his own during that Senior Nationals trip in December. He placed 18<sup>th</sup> in the 200-meter breaststroke and 26<sup>th</sup> in the 100 breast against the country's top swimmers.

He'll hopefully join the U.S. team again at Olympic Trials in late June.

While the 2008 Olympics in Beijing are an unrealistic goal, the trials experience, plus four more years of training, could help Cook book a ticket for the Games in 2012.

"I just remember getting my Junior National cut (qualifying time) and being like, 'I guess I'm done,'" Cook said. "Slowly but surely, after a year of training, you get your Senior National cut, and you do the same thing."

Cook's constant improvement was aided for several years by Jeremy Linn. A former QDD coach (he's since relocated to North Carolina), Linn won two medals for the United States at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. In the process, he set an American record in the 100-meter breaststroke that stood for a decade.

Under Linn's tutelage, Cook began to dream big.

"He kind of helped me believe in myself and believe that I can get to the next level," Cook said. "I thought I was a pretty good swimmer, but he made me believe that I could be a great swimmer."

Since then, Cook has made a believer out of many more people.

"Nevin has been the most decorated swimmer in Seton history," Jim Koehr said. "I've never seen him lose a close race — I've seen him lose, but if it's close, he's going to win."

Koehr attributes that finishing ability to Cook's sensationally strong kick at the end of races, and an amazing focus.

Outside of the pool, Cook is friendly and charismatic. Once he touches that water, though, it's a different story.

"For that time in the pool, I've always thought of it as they're my enemy and I'm not going to let my enemy beat me," Cook said of his opposition. "Right when it's over, I have no problem with you."

He has left plenty of "enemies" in his wake over the past few years.

Ideally, in the future, he'll be able to leave those Olympic inquiries in the past, too. If Cook keeps excelling, the question "When are you going to the Olympics?" may elicit a different response.

"Soon. Real soon."

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