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Swimming to success

By [Monika Sabic](#)
February 24, 2016



Melissa Berkay's performance at the Liberal Arts Championships (LAC) turned heads and put Mills' swim team on the map.

For the first time in Mills' swim team history, Berkay got the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) B cut to qualify in the NCAA championship, beating numerous records for her 200 yard butterfly: the pool record, Mills' school record, and the LAC meet and open record. The team has not had an NCAA qualifier until now.

During the three day tournament, Berkay excelled in the 200 fly, timing in at 2:06:16, qualifying her to race in the finals. There, she shaved down her time by two seconds with a time of 2:04:57 — her second best time in her swimming career. Berkay stood on the podium for first place in the finals.

Head Coach Neil Virtue was ecstatic to have one of his swimmers excel at the competition. Although everyone on the team swam outstanding performances, Berkay's performance was the culmination.

"She has a lot of natural ability combined with the ability to work hard, and have the historical experience of swimming a lot when she was growing up. That combination really is ideal," Virtue said.

Since Berkay won the event and got to be on the podium, Virtue was able to pass out the awards — a first for his time at Mills.

Although Berkay made the NCAA B cut, she will not find out until later this week if she will compete in the NCAA champs. The NCAA committee handpicks 286 of the top athletes from Division 3 schools to compete. Berkay could be one of the 146 swimmers that'll compete in the mid-March championships.

Virtue notes that people are in awe when swimmers master the butterfly stroke because it is one of the most challenging strokes to master.

This is Berkay's first semester at Mills, after a four-year break from school and swimming. Virtue was impressed with Berkay's ability to train and get back into physical shape in a small amount of time, and make a big impact during the season.

Berkay previously attended Rider University in New Jersey where she swam for their Division one team.

She believes that this is her comeback into swimming. During these past four weeks, Berkay has doubled her practice time by attending team practices in the mornings and going back to the pool in the evenings by herself.

“Swimming has just been a passion my whole life,” Berkay said. “I was determined to be on the team.”

Whether she is chosen to compete in the NCAA Championships or not, Berkay and Virtue are still training hard during these next few weeks, starting off with high intensity workouts at longer than normal distances followed by taper and shave gradually decreasing the swimming yardage while maintaining the same high intensity. This allows the body to rebuild its muscle memory, allowing Berkay to become faster and stronger in time for the race.

“I was motivated to get back into shape and do well for the team,” Berkay said.

Not only does Berkay train in the pool, she also looks towards meditation and visualization to prepare for the race. Teammate Danelis Padron looks to Berkay for wisdom and motivation to compete in her own swim events.

“I really admire that about her that she values meditation, her time with others, and keeping a positive attitude under all of that pressure,” Padron said.

Berkay’s humble personality and hard work ethic has made her a key member to the swim team. She looks to her teammates for motivation to swim harder and faster.

“I was more proud of representing Mills and my team rather than just winning a medal and setting a new LAC [record],” Berkay said.

Swimming to success was published on February 24, 2016 in [Sports & Health](#)

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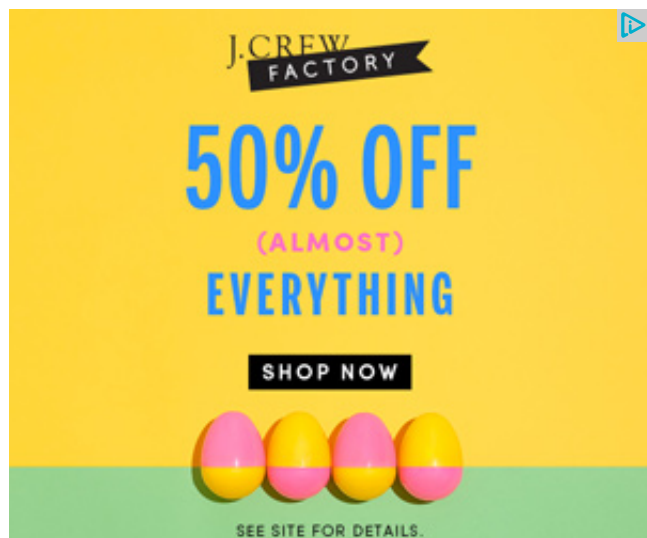
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