

SWIMMING

Zara's winding road to the top

For eight months of her teenage years, Zara Long, who flies out tomorrow week for swimming's world championships, experienced normality. She went to parties, she stayed out late, she could sleep in to something like a civilised hour – but she wasn't impressed.

Free, for the first time since she was nine, from the drill of training, the 20-year-old extrovert from south London was like a prisoner making up for lost time. "I did everything with passion," she said, to the extent that she added 10 kilos to her competing weight of 63 kilos. "Frankly, it was nothing special".

"I'd returned from the Olympics, where I'd not swum well, and felt unhappy with myself; I was going to meets out of habit rather than enjoyment. I thought, there's no money in the stupid sport, I might as well give up and try the sort of life my friends have." She got a job in a clothes shop, cash in her pocket and was quickly disillusioned. "I'd put so much time, effort and love into swimming, it seemed a waste of time to give it up."

After consulting her parents and former coach, she returned to a life of early mornings in the pool. "I had to cry myself through the first two weeks of training."

Zara's return, painful because of her lost fitness, has become more comfortable. At the Commonwealth Games, she won two silvers in the relays and at the national championships in Coventry last month, she set four personal records. The 2 min 17.90 sec set for the 200 metres individual medley ranks her at eighth in the world and she travels to Perth with real medal prospects. "I should get into the final and there, over one race, anything could happen," she said.

If she performs badly? "I don't throw my goggles round the changing room like some of the girls, I try to say to myself 'it's only a sport, don't get upset, there'll be another time.'

I'll probably swear at my coach and then apologise to him five minutes later and talk about what went wrong."

It is the subject of Sharron Davies that gets her most agitated, however. She has a strong rivalry with Sharron – the former model who was sponsored to £20,000 last year while Long has to pay her own way from her earnings as a part-time swimming teacher. "I don't hate her, we're friends, but I swim better when I race her. At the Commonwealths, I didn't care what my time was, I just wanted to beat Sharron. My coach would like to have a cardboard figure of her to put on the side of the pool whenever I compete."

A Decide whether these statements are true or false, according to the article:

1. Zara enjoyed herself while she was not training.
2. She had given up training because of her bad performance at the Olympics.
3. Training again after such a long break was fun.
4. Zara gets angry very easily.
5. She doesn't make any money out of her competition swimming.
6. Zara performs better when Sharron Davies is competing against her.

B Find the words and phrases in the article that mean the same as the following:

- enjoying experiences as much as possible because you did not experience them before
- a sports event involving a lot of people or teams competing against each other
- to stop doing something you do regularly
- disappointed
- to put someone or something into a position according to their success
- chances of success, especially in a job or career
- worried, upset

C Find the following expressions in the article:

- ohromený/á
- vytvořit rekord
- bývalý
- plavecké brýle
- soupeření
- nadávat
- polohový závod jednotlivců