

INDUCTEE PROFILE



Renee competed for the Fort Lauderdale swim team during her preparation for the 1992 Olympic trials.

In the right lane

Renee Riccio's commitment: swim to greatness

By Jim Lane

Altoona Mirror

Renee Riccio began competitive swimming at Park Hills Country Club when she was 6 years old. It was the beginning of what was to become the development of the most decorated swimmer in Blair County sports history.

At age 10, Riccio set a national YMCA record in the 50-yard freestyle. By the time she was a 16-year-old sophomore, she held every individual record at Altoona Area High School. Then, seeking to expand her development in the sport, Riccio went off to Peddie Prep School in New Jersey, and from there, it was on to West Virginia University where she became a three-time honorable mention All-American and earned a tryout for the 1992 U.S. Olympic team.

Now 37, married to her college sweetheart and former WVU swimmer Frank McCutchan and the mother of two children, Renee (Riccio) McCutchan is adding another honor with her



Renee dives into action.

induction into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

"I'm extremely honored and still in disbelief," Riccio said. "This is so special to me, especially since the honor is coming from Blair County."

Riccio traces her start in swimming to Park Hills where her parents, Richard and Jacqueline, enrolled her in a summer league program.

"I started at 6 and never stopped until I was 22," Riccio said of competitive swimming. "I fell in love with it. There were some hard times, but I don't think I ever grew tired of it."

"Karen (Harkless) Duffett was my first coach, and I had good, positive people coaching and

supporting me through all of my experiences in Altoona and Hollidaysburg."

Her first big accomplishment came when she was 10 and set a national YMCA record in the 50-yard freestyle in the 10-and-under age group while swimming under the guidance of Hans Nearhoof and Loren Hershberger at the Hollidaysburg YMCA.

"I remember how excited I was to make the high school team as a 9th grader at Roosevelt," she said. "Dave Rouch was the coach my freshman year, and Tina Gioiosa was the coach my sophomore year. I swam all of the events, and concentrated on the 200 IM and 100-yard butterfly at the District 6 and PIAA meets. I have a lot of good memories from Altoona High."

She enrolled at Peddie Prep School in Hightstown, N.J. at the age of 16.

"It was a huge decision," she said, "but I wanted to expand my opportunities. It was difficult, and I missed home a lot. Swimming was

big there, we had five hours of intense training with coach Chris Martin, who later coached the 1992 U.S. Olympic team, and it got me ready for college."

Riccio chose West Virginia University after visiting Villanova, Bucknell, Penn State and George Washington.

"I knew immediately WVU was the school for me when I walked onto the campus," she said. "It was a big school, but not overwhelming, and I felt comfortable with my teammates and coaches."

It was at WVU where coach Kevin Gilson came into Riccio's life.

"I was actually a little burned out," Riccio said, "and college could have gone either way for me, but Coach Gilson made such a big impact on me. He helped me get to a different level. I was a National Junior qualifier, and he made me into a National Senior qualifier.

"When I got to WVU, I probably had lost a little competitive edge. He brought my confidence level back, helped me to learn to compete again, and brought the fun of the sport back to me. Plus, he and his wife treated me like a daughter."

Gilson, who will serve as Riccio's Hall of Fame presenter, has fond memories of her as well.

"She was one of the hardest-training swimmers I ever coached," said Gilson, who guided the WVU men's and women's programs over 30 years. "She was a very positive influence on the team with great leadership skills.

"She was just a pleasure to coach."

While attending WVU, Riccio, through the help of Gilson, spent a couple of summers in Florida



As a freshman in 1986, Renee (front row, fourth from left) was a key part of Altoona High's swim team. Fellow teammates included, front, from left: Cherene Benjamin, Jennifer Camberg, Jennifer Harshberger, Renee, Kath Kosut, Missy Moore, Kim Summers. Back row: Dawn Lepore, Chris Miller, Rhonda Lunghofer, Carrie Mansfield, Denise Weinzerl, Jolynn VanHorne, Sandy Conrad.

training with Jack Nelson and the Fort Lauderdale Swim Team. The 1992 Fort Lauderdale team, which included Riccio, won the U.S.S. National Championship.

"That was quite an experience," she said. "There were swimmers from all over the country, and Coach Nelson was bigger than life."

At WVU, Riccio earned honorable mention All-American honors as a sophomore, junior and senior. To attain that status, a swimmer must finish in the top 16 in an NCAA championship event. She also was the most valuable swimmer all three years in the Eastern Intercollegiate Swimming and Diving Championships, and was

team captain as a junior and senior. Riccio still holds two WVU records.

In 1992, Riccio made the Olympic trials in Indianapolis. Representing WVU as a junior, she qualified for the Olympic trials in the 100-

meter butterfly, but missed the 200 butterfly by a tenth of a second.

There were 42 qualifiers in the Olympic trials 100 butterfly event, and Riccio finished 13th. Only the top two finishers are named to the Olympic team, but Riccio said it was an experience she'll never forget.

"It was the most emotional meet I was ever in," she said. "They had an American flag stretched over the entire 50 meters of the pool. I'll never forget it."

Following graduation from WVU, Renee married Frank and, after stops in Atlanta, Charlotte and Stroudsburg, PA, they settled in Morgantown, W.Va. They have two children — Jacqueline, 6, and Frank, 4. Frank is a district manager for Abbott Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company, and Renee has worked as an aquatic therapist at Health Works, a rehabilitation and fitness center.

Her parents and brother Phil still live in Altoona and the McCutchans visit often.

"It was such a wonderful place to grow up," she said. "That's why the Hall of Fame selection is so meaningful."



Riccio bio

Sport: Swimming
Hometown: Altoona
College: West Virginia University
Hall of Fame achievement: Three-time honorable mention All-American (twice in 100 butterfly, once in the 200 butterfly) and participant in the 1992 Olympic trials.
Current residence: Morgantown, W.Va.