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## Racing to the wall

### By Bob Taylor

Leann Toomey wasn't thinking about winning during an Issaquah Swim Team (IST) practice race four years ago. All she wanted to do was keep up with Mike Hollowell in Julius Boehm Pool.

Although she didn't beat the former Liberty High swimmer, that practice was a turning point in Toomey's swimming career. Since then Toomey has concentrated on winning and it's been other swimmers who've had to try to keep up with her.

Toomey, a Sammamish resident who will be a senior at Seattle's Holy Names Academy in the fall, has developed into one of the top swimmers in the state. Last fall Toomey finished second in the 100-yard butterfly at the 2A/3A girls state meet in the King County Aquatics Center. She posted an automatic all-American time of 56.49 seconds. It beat her winning time at the Sea-King District meet of 56.61, which set a district record. She also finished seventh at state in the 100 freestyle.

Her efforts in state and district were outstanding because Toomey attends a Metro League school and that conference's swim season doesn't begin until after the state meet. Most swimmers in the state meet have already competed in league competition.

"I read about the other swimmers, especially from Kingco (Conference), and it gives me some incentive," said Toomey.

### Undefeated in Metro

Toomey went through the Metro season undefeated for the third straight year. She set a new Metro record in the 100 butterfly of 55.60 at the league championship meet in February. She also set a new school record in the 200 freestyle.

"It was a pretty good year," Toomey said. "It gives me a lot of incentive to do even better this fall. I want to win a state title and set a state record." Toomey has had a strong summer for IST. At the recent Seattle Open, Toomey won five events. She captured the 50 freestyle, 100 freestyle, 400 freestyle, 100 butterfly and the 200 butterfly. She also swam on the winning 400 freestyle and 400 medley relays.

"She really had a great meet," said IST coach Kyle Johnson. "She kind of expanded her repertoire of events. The 100 fly has been her prime event but she has been working on a variety of distances."

Toomey has been swimming competitively for 11 years. However, it wasn't until she joined the IST and Johnson became her coach four years ago that things turned around.

### Former soccer player

Until that time, Toomey was swimming and also playing soccer. "I really enjoyed soccer. The most fun I had was playing on a team that won just one game," Toomey said. "The best thing I learned from soccer was that winning isn't everything. That team chemistry is important."

When Toomey began her freshman year at Holy Names, she had to pick a sport. "My mom said I had to choose one. She said I couldn't do both," Toomey said. "I chose swimming. As things turned out I think I made the right choice."

So does Johnson.

"She's improved so much. If she does well at the nationals next month, I think that would be a pretty good indicator that she could compete at the NCAA Division I level," Johnson said.

Over the years IST has developed several outstanding swimmers who have competed for NCAA Division I teams. Liberty High's Alissa Hollowell, who won the 200 individual medley at state, and Issaquah's Sarah Davis are two of the recent products. Both graduated this spring. Hollowell will swim for the University of California at Santa Barbara and Davis for San Diego State University. Issaquah High graduate Leslie Mix, who won six state titles and later earned 11 all-American honors at the University of Tennessee, is regarded as the best girls swimmer to come out of IST.

"Alissa and Leslie are two of my idols," Toomey said. "I've always looked up to Alissa by the way she competes and handles her academics. I remember watching Leslie swim in practice a few years ago and thinking 'I want to be like her.' Leslie swam in the Olympic Trials and that's one of my goals it to one day swim in the Trials."

Toomey also wants to swim in college and take courses in animation.

"I love to draw. Sometimes I even doodle in class," she said.

### **Long daily drive**

Toomey's drive to be like Hollowell and Mix takes a major commitment during the school year. That's because Toomey has to get up early every morning for practices in Julius Boehm Pool from 5 to 6 a.m., then drive to Holy Names. After school it's back to the pool.

"Sometimes its tough to get some of our kids to go two blocks for practice," Johnson said. "Leann is amazing in that she's able to overcome a lot distractions, social pressure and other things that typically hold an athlete back. She has really been able to focus on what she needs to accomplish."

Toomey credits Johnson with her development as a swimmer.

"I've done my best with Kyle as my coach," Toomey said. "He was really the first coach who tapped my potential. He's been the coach who really believed in me and has helped me succeed."

Johnson realized Toomey's potential when she was an eighth-grader. To improve her time in the 100 fly and possibly get her qualified for the nationals, Johnson had Toomey race against Mike Hollowell, Alissa's older brother.

"I just wanted to keep up with him," Toomey said. "I swam as hard as I could to stay with him. When I touched the wall, I looked up and saw Kyle. He was holding his stopwatch and grinning. When he showed me the time (58.51) I didn't believe it. It was faster than I had ever swam the fly. It showed that if I worked hard I had potential."

Johnson said the practice race was a turning point.

"She always had athletic ability. From that time on, she has focused on getting to the wall first," Johnson said. "Through a lot of hard training, she knows how to get there now."