

# 3 area swimmers have sights set on Beijing Olympics

By ROSEMARIE ROSS  
*Special to The Phoenix*

It's hard to believe three area swimmers — three former Pioneer Athletic Conference swimmers, that is — would make it all the way to the Olympic trials. And make it in the same year.

But Patrick Schirk, Shayne Longacre and Emily Christy have made it happen, and the three were at the Qwest Center in Omaha, Neb., Sunday for the start of the U.S. Olympic Trials.

Schirk, the former Owen J. Roberts standout, has been there before, qualifying for the 2004 trials. But Longacre and

Christy, who were standouts at Boyertown and Springfield, respectively, are making their trials' debut.

Schirk was seeded sixth in the 200-meter backstroke and 12th in the 100 backstroke. Longacre was seeded 18th in the 100 breaststroke and 54th in the 200 breaststroke. Christy was seeded 55th in the 200 butterfly.

All three have known for more than a year — Schirk actually for three

years — that they qualified. They stayed at their respective universities — Schirk at Penn State, Longacre at Rutgers, Christy at Michigan —

training hard since school ended. Now it's crunch time, time to step on those blocks and give it their best shot.

Christy will have nearly her whole Michigan team with her.

"It's really exciting when

you realize we have so many girls going," Christy said when reached at Ann Arbor. "So we kind of make a team event of it, and that's really a different dynamics than what I was used to from big meets in the past when it might have just been Shayna (Longacre) and I."

That was back in the days when Christy was also on the Boyertown YMCA team and the two would usually qualify for the Y nationals.

"To have a whole team there really makes it exciting on a new level," Christy said. "I made it (to the trials) within a few weeks from when the cuts opened, so I've known for a couple of years I was going."

From his early days at the Pottstown YMCA, Schirk always seemed destined to go far. Every year he advanced to the Y nationals in whatever age group he was in at the time. Along with winning national Y and PIAA state titles in the backstroke, sure enough, four years ago, as a

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16-year-old high schooler, Schirk also qualified for the 2004 Olympic Trials.

Now he is going into his senior year at Penn State and is back for his second chance, but in one of the most star-studded events that includes Michael Phelps, who the world is raving about.

He picked a great event to compete in, Schirk was told when reached at Penn State last week.

"I picked a horrible event, being an American right now," he shot back.

Only the top two finishers in each event go on to the Summer Games.

"I'm trying to look at this



LONGACRE



SCHIRK



CHRISTY

meet realistically, I'm on the outside looking in," Schirk said. "And right now the top two seeds are former world record holders, and Michael Phelps is in the mix, too."

Ryan Lochte is the top seed in the 200. Aaron Piersol is the second seed, with Phelps seeded third.

"So I don't think I have much of a shot of making the team in 2008," Schirk said.

In the 100 backstroke Piersol is the top seed, with Phelps second and Lochte third. Schirk has raced them before, including Phelps a number of times.

"I doubt that this is the last time I'll ever race (Phelps)," he said. "But he's just another competitor."

And although Schirk sees his chances of going on to Beijing as slim, it doesn't diminish the thrill of being in the mix.

"I'm still making a run for the United States Olympic team, which not many swimmers out there can say," he said. "Maybe a half-percent of the (American) swimmers out there get a chance at making a run at making the Olympic team."

It all started at the North End Swim Club before he even got to school. Now he'd the sixth-fastest backstroke in the country.

"I want to make top eight in both events, because I think it's a very doable goal, and put myself in a situation where I could possibly make the Olympic team," he said. "It's still a race, still something anyone can win on any day."

And having been there before, he knows what to expect this time.

"I'm not going to be a frightened, little 16-year-old with my eyes wide open, just looking around with all the other big-name swimmers out there," he said. "I feel like I'm a well-accomplished swimmer and, hopefully, have some 16-year-olds looking at me, doing the same thing I did. And maybe I can help them out like a couple



of swimmers helped me out in 2004.”

Even as a “frightened 16-year-old” he did amazing, shooting up from his 44th seed in the 100 backstroke to finish 15th overall, and from his 28th seed in the 200 to touch 16th overall.

Those 2004 trials were in Long Beach, Calif., in an outside pool, set up in a parking lot. This week’s trials are in the heart of the country, inside a huge convention center/sports arena.

“It’s something I’ve always dreamed about, having a pool inside a huge complex, an arena or coliseum,” Schirk said. “There are going to be a lot of people, it’s going to be loud, it’s going to be like a basketball game or hockey game. And I always wanted swimming to be a sport like that. My biggest dream for the past couple of years has been having a pool inside Beaver Stadium. It’s never going to happen, but that’s been my dream.”

And Schirk won’t be all alone this time, with nearly his entire Nittany Lions team qualifying, 20 in all and all close friends.

“That will make the whole experience a lot more enjoyable,” he said. “Having a team and a whole bunch of friends and family sharing this with me.”

Not only will his mom, dad and sister be there, but a huge

contingent of Pottstown area fans, some former OJR teammates and their parents will also be there to cheer him as well as Longacre and Christy on, who both will also have plenty of teammates and family there.

“It helps a lot to have some Rutgers teammates here because they’re here to cheer you on,” said Longacre, going into her junior year at Rutgers. “It’s just more fun when you have some really close friends swimming with you. You get to watch them race and if they do well, it’s very exciting. And you don’t just have to hang out with the coaches all the time.

“I guess what I worry about the most is not doing my best time or just not being happy with how I swam or how I competed. I hope to make the semifinals, which is Top 16 in the 100 (breaststroke) so I get to swim at night. Then they narrow it down to eight for finals. To place in the Top 16 in the country would be pretty amazing.”

Longacre, a former state champion in the 200 individual medley as well as silver medalist in the breaststroke, admitted she is a little nervous.

“But the pressure isn’t on me, though, it’s more so on the big shots,” she said. “I guess I should use that to my advantage, go out there and swim with all my heart.

“At first I was like, ‘Oh, it’s in Omaha, Nebraska,’ but we

went there a couple of weeks ago and it’s a really pretty area and the pool is amazing. It’s an ice rink and they put a pool on top of it. They said it’s going to be sold out and there’s going to be about 9,000 people there, which is a lot.”

Christy isn’t one bit nervous. “Not yet,” Christy said. “Maybe when I get there. More than anything else, it’s just going to be exciting to see so much fast swimming because this will probably be the fastest Olympic trials the United States has ever seen.

“We’ve been training hard all summer. There’s so many kids out here from our team and then so many professionals who stay here with our Club Wolverine, which is our United States swimming program (and includes Phelps). It’s all been very exciting.”

As for Schirk, if he can’t make the Olympic team this time, maybe three will be the charm ... next time.

“I don’t ever have a clear plan as to what I’m going to do when I graduate, but I’m pretty sure I’m going to keep swimming,” he said.

“I’d definitely like to be swimming in 2012. I’m just going to play it by ear each year. Hopefully there is money in there to support myself and I can keep swimming. I think I would have a much better shot making the Olympic team in 2012 compared to (this year).”