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OU alumna aims for Paralympic gold

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

When Cheryl Angelelli, CAS '93, sustained a spine injury while diving into a pool at age 14, her dreams of becoming a champion swimmer didn't end. After a long rehabilitation process, Angelelli reentered the pool and became a national swim champion. Now her sights are set higher – a gold medal at the **2004 Paralympic Games** in Athens, Greece.

The diving accident left Angelelli a quadriplegic without the use of her legs and fingers. She was introduced to wheelchair sports while at the **Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan**. But it wasn't until 1996 that she considered competing again as a swimmer.

"After the accident, I concentrated on my recovery, not sports," said Angelelli, who earned a communications degree at Oakland. "The spinal cord takes much longer to heal than other injuries. I really didn't think about sports until I did some freelance writing for a disability publication on the 1996 Olympic and Paralympic games in Atlanta. I discovered a whole new world of wheelchair sports. It really opened my eyes and made me miss being in a competitive atmosphere. Shortly afterwards, I became involved in adapted swimming."

The Paralympics is the highest athletic achievement for elite athletes with physical disabilities. It is second in size only to the Olympics among world sporting events, with athletes from more than 30 countries competing in 21 events, 18 of which are also contested in the Olympics. The event is held two weeks after each Olympics using the same facilities. The first Paralympics were held in 1960 in Rome, Italy.

Inspired by the Atlanta games, Angelelli decided to begin training for the 2000 Paralympics in Sydney, Australia. Reentering the water brought back some old fears, but Angelelli overcame those and made the 1998 U.S. Paralympic team. She became the U.S. champion in the 100-meter freestyle prior to the Paralympics, where she finished sixth in the world in the 50-meter and 200-meter freestyle, seventh in the 100-meter freestyle, and was a member of the women's 4 x 50 meter medley relay, which set a new American record and placed fifth.

"Training for the Paralympics was hard. I didn't realize what a lofty goal that was," Angelelli said. "I was pleased with the results considering it was my first Paralympics and was very happy that we set a new American record. I didn't set many high expectations, but got a lot of experience. The event made me feel a lot more confident and whet my appetite for more."

Angelelli decided then to prepare for the 2004 Paralympics. With her fiancé, swimming coach Shawn Kornoelija, she began training in earnest. Her normal routine consists of an hour and a half in the pool daily, along with strength and conditioning workouts once a week. Angelelli set aside her routine temporarily for her 2002 wedding, but picked up the pace after her nuptials and had a strong finish in the Canadian Open Championships last July.

"I swam the best meet of my entire life," Angelelli said. "I won six gold medals, set two American records and posted personal best times in each event. My biggest accomplishment was dropping five seconds off my personal best time in the 200-meter freestyle. This had been my best event, in which I was ranked fourth in the world. With the time drop, I'm now ranked second in the world and am in great position to make the 2004 games."

Qualification for the U.S. team is based primarily on a swimmer's best ranked time posted at a trial meet. The final qualifying meet for the 2004 games will be held Nov. 29-30 in Indianapolis.

"I gave up a lot of my life to make it to Sydney," Angelelli said. "Training for the Paralympics is almost like a second job. Now my goal is to see how far I can go. My results at the Canadian meet gave me a lot of personal satisfaction and the drive to train even more and bring home a gold."

Angelelli is the marketing and public relations manager for the **Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan** as well a 2000 inductee in the **Athletes with Disabilities Hall of Fame**.

The 2004 Paralympics will be held Sept. 17-28 in Athens, Greece. For more information, visit the **International Paralympic Committee** Web site. More information on American athletes and individual sports and events can be found on the **U.S. Paralympics** Web site.

SUMMARY

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