

Spring-Ford's Cushman signs to swim at Pitt

By ROSEMARIE ROSS
Special to The Phoenix

ROYERSFORD — After starting his scholastic swimming career without a high school team, and then competing on a start-up crew his sophomore year, Alex Cushman was instantly attracted to the huge University of Pittsburgh swimming squad.

"My dad actually found it for me," Cushman said. "He was looking online for schools, came across the University of Pittsburgh, and felt I should give them a try. So I filled out their application, they got back to me and they were impressed with what I had to offer, so they asked me if I wanted to come."

Cushman checked out George Mason, Towson, and a few others. Towson was very interested in him as well. But one visit to Pitt, a day watching them compete in a Big East meet, and he was sold.

And Cushman signed a national letter of intent to continue his academic and swimming careers with the Division I Panthers.

"It's a great school academically, they have a huge swimming program, and I felt the school would really take my swimming to the next level," he said. "They're hard to beat academically."

"The coach is great, the team is great. Pittsburgh is a really cool city ... real friendly, there is a lot of stuff to do, everybody is nice there. It was just the best school choice for me."

He is still undecided which way he will go academically.

Cushman certainly had a solid high school career, starting out as a freshman district qualifier in 2005, and capturing the state championship in the 100-yard butterfly and the 100 freestyle as a member of his Pottstown YMCA team, and swimming on the YMCA's winning 200 medley relay that year.

He followed that his sophomore year by qualifying again for districts and qualifying for the YMCA nationals.

In 2007, his junior year, he qualified for states and took 11th in the 100 butterfly. He also was a YMCA state medal winner that year and swam on

Pottstown Y's medley relay team that took 14th at the nationals.

Cushman closed out his high school career as a state qualifier, touching first in the consolation finals, to place ninth overall in the 100 fly, then closed out his YMCA career with a silver medal in the 100 fly at states to qualify for nationals. His Pottstown

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YMCA 200 medley relay squad took 12th at the nationals, and the 400 medley relay placed 14th.

He earned all-state honorable mention in 2007, and was recently listed on the high school all-state team recognized as a 2008 YMCA All American.

Panthers head coach Chuck Knoles expects him to continue his excellence in the butterfly.

"And freestyle, probably," Cushman said. "I'll work with the sprint group and take it from there."

Cushman played football from seventh through ninth grade. By all accounts, he showed a lot of promise as a defensive end.

"I was going to play (football) my sophomore year, but after swim season I got really good so I wanted to concentrate on swimming and didn't go out (for football) the next year," he said.

"I'd been swimming for so long, it seemed I was better in swimming than I was football even though I liked to play football a lot more than I liked to swim."

He started swimming when he was 7 at the Nine Oaks Swim Club in Upper Providence Township.

"I liked it, stuck with it, and from there I was swimming year-round," he said. "It became a habit, I guess. I kept getting better and better, and kept doing it and doing it."



Back in those early Nine Oaks days, he also started taking swimming lessons at the Pottstown YMCA.

"That's when I wanted to join the Y team for the winter time and my parents signed me up for that," he recalled.

He has been on the Pottstown YMCA team every since.

"That's were it all started, at the Pottstown Y with my swim lessons," he said. "First, Bonnie Troyan was the Y coach, then Kathy Cook took over, and they've really helped the most with my swimming progress."

Cook remembers when he first started.

"He always was a pretty lanky kid and seemed to really like the water," Cook said. "He has always been one of the hardest workers we've had. He was very self-motivated, did a lot of the dryland on his own, and would do his weight training in the morning before he'd go to school. He was always loyal to us."

That first year of high school swimming wasn't easy for Cushman. As big as Spring-Ford High School is, the Rams did not have a swimming team when Cushman came in as a freshman.

But he never considered giving it up, kept training with the Pottstown Y team — where they had their own little crew of a couple of swimmers from area schools

that didn't have teams.

Spring-Ford finally did get a team his sophomore season. It was a small one, but it was a team.

"It made life a lot easier for me," Cushman said.

Cushman instantly became the leader of the small Rams squad as it grew into a contender, finishing 9-3 his senior year.

"That was awesome, I couldn't believe it," Cushman said. "For us to come that far that fast was just unbelievable."

Veteran swimming coach Bob Sieracki came in to build that Rams program.

"Alex was our best swimmer from the start for the boys team," Sieracki said. "When we started our program three years ago, I counted on Alex and he came through many times for the team."

"He's a good leader in the pool. So starting a new program, and not knowing what we had, I was happy to have him."

Cushman feels good looking back on his high school career.

"Every year I have goals set in my mind and I do my best to reach them," he said. "Sometimes I fall short a bit, but I always did my best times for that season, so I can't complain. I was happy every year."



JRC photo by Kevin Hoffman

Spring-Ford's Alex Cushman signed his national letter of intent to swim for the University of Pittsburgh in the fall with his parents Al and Joanne Cushman (right) and swim coaches Kathy Cook (left) and Bob Sieracki at his side.