

by Craig Neff

Standing tall in the Shorts

The surprise star of the U.S. Short Course meet was 6' 1" Tammy Thomas

University of Kansas senior Tammy Thomas arrived on the swimming scene last month without warning, as powerful and sudden as a Corn Belt twister. She swept into the Women's NCAA Championships in Lincoln, Neb., a complete unknown and promptly blew away American records in three of her four freestyle sprints. Then last week, at the Phillips 66/U.S. Swimming Short Course Championships in Indianapolis, Thomas, who's a muscular 6' 1" and 160 pounds, had already won the 100-yard free when she stepped to the blocks for her heat of the 50. She proceeded to churn out the fastest time at that distance ever swum by a woman in a 25-yard pool, a 22.13 clocking that lowered her own U.S. record by .04 (world records for short-course pools are not kept). "I have a lot of size," she said afterward, smiling. "I guess when I get all that going, it's pretty hard to stop."

Thomas has the explosive starts and turns typical of great sprinters, but otherwise she's an anomaly. Swimmers of her caliber don't suddenly appear at age 21. They rise young, like California high schoolers Tiffany Cohen, 16, and Jeff Kostoff, 17, who together won seven events at Indy and established three of the meet's seven American records. Swimmers often fade young, too, like Cynthia (Sippy) Woodhead, who set her first world freestyle record at 14 and now, at 19, is struggling to return to world-class level. Even Tracy Caulkins, swimming's Grand Old Lady, whose three national titles last week raised her career total to 45, is just 20 years old.

When Thomas was Caulkins' age she hadn't yet placed in a U.S. national meet; when she was 14 she'd hardly taken up the sport. An Army brat, she grew up in a medley relay of cities—about 15 in all—from Fort Knox, Ky., where she was born, to Bangkok, Thailand, where she joined her first swim team, to Fort Sill, Okla., where she went to high school. "We moved every nine months," says Thomas, whose father, Robert, is now a retired lieutenant colonel.

As a result, Thomas' training was constantly interrupted, and before this year

she'd never swum faster than 23.22 in the 50-yard free or 50.20 in the 100. Then, at the NAAs, she easily defeated American record holder Jill Sterkel of Texas in both events, cutting the 100 record from 48.61 to 48.40 and the 50 mark from 22.41 to 22.28 and then to 22.17.

Thomas can't explain her improvement. What she apparently lacked until recently were strong legs—squats, running and bicycling built them up—and confidence. She bolstered the latter by working with Dr. Andrew Jacobs, stress psychologist for the U.S. Olympic cycling team. "We did a lot of work on imagery," said Thomas, "on focusing in on what I was doing and closing out what was around me. Now I focus on a time."

Thomas had a sub-22.13 in mind for Friday night's finals of the 50, but had to settle for a 22.20 to win her second national title. "My start was flat and I didn't drive my legs into the wall," she said.

Still, including relay legs, Thomas had a clocking better than Sterkel's old U.S. 50 record for the sixth straight time. No one else has done so even once.

Like Thomas, Texas sophomore Rick Carey has been busily setting U.S. records. In March he broke the American 100- and 200-yard backstroke marks twice each, trimming them by roughly two-thirds of a second, to 48.25 and 1:45.21, respectively. Last week he planned to lower them again.

But shaving records is easier for Carey, it seems, than shaving himself. When he uses shaving cream he breaks out in a rash—a dread curse for a swimmer. Besides, last Wednesday night he nearly forgot about his crucial prerace streamlining shave. Two hours before the finals of the 200 back, he had to rush to a bathroom in the Indiana University Natatorium with a disposable razor and a fresh bar of Ivory soap.

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Thomas may be an ancient 21, but she swam like a teen, winning the 50 and 100 free.