

FALCON SWIMMING AND DIVING

CADETS LEARN THE VALUE OF COURAGE UNDER WATER

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEWIS CARLYLE



C1C Chelsea Tompkins practices on the 5 meter high dive.

AIR TIGHT TALENT

C1C Chelsea Tompkins stands on top of the five meter board overlooking the indoor swimming and diving facility deep within the Cadet Gymnasium. Arching gracefully, she leans backwards and stands on her hands, her legs pointed perfectly at the ceiling. In the next instant, her body tilts toward the pool, and she glides into freefall, flipping once before splashing into the water below. The other cadet divers watch intently, and then, one by one, each takes his place at the end of the high board to vault acrobatically into the water.

At the other end of the pool, the Falcon swim team plows through the practice lanes in an assortment of freestyle, breast stroke and butterfly. The water is alive with cadets, all training diligently at two of the world's most demanding sports. Rob Clayton, the men's swim coach, runs each practice with meticulous attention to detail. "Our men's swimming and diving teams have been very competitive ever since the Mountain West Conference was formed," he says over the din of echoes

which fill the natatorium. "Last year, we finished runners up to the conference championship."

Cadet swimmers practice diving off of their entry platforms while the coaches watch on video monitors. Each swimmer is invited to view himself after each dive; with swimming, every millisecond counts, making it essential for cadets to polish their technique to perfection. ▷



Cadets on the men's swim team practice
3-4 hours a day.



Swimmers use video surveillance to perfect their platform diving.

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

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“The guys train three to four hours a day,” Coach Clayton continues, “pretty much all school year. We also offer practices throughout the summer. We had five swimmers compete in the Olympic trials in 2008. We hope to have that many in the 2012 trials.” In the water, the team starts practicing mock relays. Each leg of the relay employees a different style, from butterfly to breast stroke. “We’re on the verge of making a run at the Mountain West Championship,” Clayton says, “and we’re very close to doing that. We’re very close to getting our swimmers into the national championship. We haven’t been there since 2007.”

Back on the high board, C1C David Arlington springs into action, tucking in for an aerial dance with gravity. “Diving in college is one of the best experiences I can imagine,” Arlington explains. “One weekend, we’ll be in California and the next, we’ll be diving against Army or Navy on the East Coast. It’s very exciting, entertaining and fun all wrapped up into one. It’s interesting seeing how other schools do things differently than we do.”

“Make every dive count. If you can do that, you’ll always progress, and you can compete at any level, so long as you stay focused.”

C1C Chelsea Tompkins echoes her fellow diver’s sentiments. “It’s nice to get away from Academy life for a while,” she says. “I love this team and traveling is fun. It’s hard being the only girl on the team though. I’m kind of just one of the guys now, but it would be nice to have another girl up there with us.”

Stan Curnow is the Falcon’s diving coach. He studies each move carefully as the cadets keep up a continuous rotation of dives. “It takes a lot of mental toughness,” he says frankly. “It can be scary up there when you’re flipping around—so you have to have good air sense. Another thing they need is just downright courage. These kids need to be honest, they need to have a commitment to the military, and they need to be serious about school. Those are the first three things which go into this program. Talent and diving come later. The final element is that they need to enjoy diving, they need to love their sport. At USAFA, these kids dive because they want to, not because they have to.”

Competition in the Mountain West Conference is fierce. Wyoming, BYU and Utah all field strong programs, and for USAFA to remain competitive, there has to be an influx of new talent at the Academy. Winning meets is the first step toward gaining better awareness, which all leads up to attracting a strong balance of new recruits. ▷



Swimming at 7,200 ft. gives cadets a training advantage over schools at lower elevations.

Coach Clayton knows what it's like being the underdog. Although the Falcons are steadily improving, the road ahead is fraught with challenges for the Academy swim team. "Unlike football or basketball," he says, "there's very little external praise or reward for what athletes in this sport do. They've got to be motivated from within, to pursue excellence and to continue to train day after day." Regarding young athletes who are looking to compete at the collegiate level, Clayton is quick to offer this advice: "By the time you're 13 or 14 years old, you really need to commit to pursuing excellence in your area. The guys on our team have been committed to swimming for a number of years before they ever entered the Academy. Perseverance, education and attention to small details are huge in terms of becoming a great swimmer."

As it turns out, the same is true of diving. An athlete cannot become proficient overnight. It takes years of training and dedica-

tion. "Train really hard," Cadet Tompkins advises. "You have to want this, it takes commitment and desire."

"Make every dive count," Cadet Arlington adds. "It's something our coach tells us all the time. If you can do that, you'll always progress, and you can compete at any level, so long as you stay focused."

Balancing such demanding sports with the rigors of the academic and military curriculums at the Academy can be very difficult for these young athletes, especially when the prospect of praise and recognition is so small. Yet glory is not something that keeps these cadets motivated. Instead, their desire to improve themselves—to pull off the perfect dive, to be the fastest one in the water—is what inspires them. It is their ambition, their drive, their continuous quest for excellence that will some day follow them out of the pool and into their careers as officers. ▣



C1C David Arlington hones his technique on the 5 meter platform.