**Nanooks swimmer Kinworthy prepping for Miss Alaska competition**

By Nona Letuligasenoa

Alaska Nanooks swimmer Sierra Kinworthy may be temporarily trading in her swim cap for a crown — but she’s going to hold on to the swimsuit. The Wasilla native is preparing for one of her biggest competitions yet, only this time, it’s not in a pool.

With the same drive, focus and work ethic she uses when approaching a collegiate swim meet, Kinworthy hopes to capture the title of Miss Alaska 2017 in Anchorage on June 8. If Kinworthy succeeds, she will qualify and advance to the 97th Miss America Competition in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on Sept. 10.

“I’ve really wanted to compete within the Miss America Organization since I was a little girl,” Kinworthy said. “Growing up, I adored watching the pageant and dreaming of being a role model to young girls like myself. I knew in high school that I wanted to compete in the Miss Alaska pageant eventually and this is a perfect time in my life to do so.”

In her first year at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the sophomore transfer from Arkansas' Ouachita Baptist University made an immediate impact on the Nanooks’ roster this season, kicking off the 2016-17 campaign with a top-20 finish at the inaugural Collegiate Open Water Championships in September.

Kinworthy appeared in nine meets for the Nanooks this season, breaking the top-five overall on 22 different occasions. Kinworthy also set career-best times in four different events this year, including the 400 IM (4:54.99), the 500-yard freestyle (5:10.33), the 1,000-yard freestyle (10:26.69) and the 1,650-yard freestyle (17:34.04).

Kinworthy said working with Head Coach Scott Lemley and Assistant Coach Kinsey Laine helped improve her times throughout the season.

“I’ve always been blessed with great coaches, but Kinsey and Scott bring an intensity and focus that I’ve never seen before,” she said. “They are both so energetic and supportive, it’s impossible to not want to give them your best effort.”

With the Nanooks’ 2016-17 season coming to a conclusion at the end of February, Kinworthy could choose to use the time away from the pool and focus on academics. She’s already a star student-athlete, as exemplified by her being named to the Fall 2016 Dean’s List.

Instead, that time has been spent training for the upcoming Miss Alaska pageant, which includes working with a nutritionist and trainer, an interview coach and a choreographer to help with a Charleston-inspired jazz dance, which will serve as her talent in June.

“Pageant prep is a complete constant. Every day I work on updating my knowledge of current events, maintaining a healthy lifestyle for the swimsuit competition and trying to prep myself for questions I may be asked during the interview portion,” Kinworthy said of the demands of pageant prep. “The most time-consuming area is my talent portion, just because I really want to perform my best on stage. I love dancing and I want to be able to show my personality through my choreography.”

Despite balancing school, off-season swimming training, pageant prep and volunteering with the Alaska Special Olympics on Saturdays, Kinworthy takes it all in stride and continues to use it as a learning tool for the future.

“I think learning to balance this all will be something valuable I can carry with me after this experience is over,” she said. “Honestly, I feel like I’m constantly running from class to practice to dance rehearsal, but I wouldn’t want it any other way. I think my experience as an athlete has actually helped because I am very goal-oriented and collegiate athletes are really great at learning how to prioritize and organize their time.”

Kinworthy credits her family as being her biggest support system during the journey to become the next Miss Alaska.

“My family has been so great throughout this entire process. My mom and dad have constantly reminded me that the only thing I can control is how I prep and carry myself in my training and on stage,” Kinworthy said. “My friends, teammates and the community at UAF have been so great, as well. I have a great support system, which makes this this all the more fun and rewarding.”

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Cutlines:

*Christian Garcia photo
Sierra Kinworthy appeared in nine swim meets for the Nanooks this season, breaking the top-five overall 22 times.*

*David Hatfield photo
Following a solid debut with the Alaska Nanooks swim team, Sierra Kinworthy is planning to participate in the 2017 Miss Alaska competition this summer.*