

YMCA NATIONALS



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Alex Sotek, a swimmer from the Berkshire Family YMCA in Pittsfield, has qualified for the Nationals in North Carolina in April.

New Lebanon High, Pittsfield YMCA swimmer Alex Sotek ready for Nationals

By **JESSE KOLODKIN**
The Berkshire Eagle

It's a big moment at the YMCA in Pittsfield. Or rather, for one of the Y's swimmers. It's been a decade since the Y or swim coach Cathy Cybulski has had a youth swimmer advance to the YMCA National Swim Meet.



Sotek

But that decade-long dry spell will end once Alex Sotek hits the water on Tuesday. The Canaan, New York native has been swimming with Cybulski for longer than that. And after a standout senior season, she'll be participating in Nationals in Greensboro, North Carolina in two events; the 100 butterfly and 50 freestyle.

"I'm nervous, but I'm also excited 'cause I know I'm going to do really well. I can just feel it," Sotek said with a smile. "I wouldn't say I'm stressed out, it's good nerves. Just anxious, I know I'm going to do well, I'm just nervous about going. It should be good, I know a couple people there so it should be a good meet, I'll be ready for it."

Originally Sotek qualified in just the butterfly. But she took advantage of swimming in the Speedo Sectionals at Ithaca College this past week. She had been one-100th of a second off of qualifying in the 50 freestyle and more than closed that gap to qualify in that event at Nationals.

"It was cool, now I'm not just swimming in one event," Sotek said, at the Pittsfield Family



Sotek will compete in the freestyle and the butterfly at Nationals.

YMCA earlier this week. "I remember when I got out of the pool, I dropped a little more than half a second in the fly. I check my phone and [Cybulski] is already texting, 'I'm so proud of you!'... I was really out of breath, I was dying a little bit, but I was really excited, I was smiling."

"We kind of expected it, it worked out and she had a great meet this past weekend," Cybulski said before adding with a laugh, "I screamed and jumped and tossed my phone and I'm crying, my husband's like 'She's at a swim meet again.'"

That won't be the only swimming Sotek will do down in North Carolina. She'll be participating in time trials as well. They don't count for points, but are a way for the swimmers there to compete at a high level and test themselves in other events against quality competition.

In time trials, Sotek will swim the 100 freestyle, 100 backstroke, 200 free and 200 back.

The senior at New Lebanon High School has been swimming at the Y in Pittsfield since she was eight or nine, learning from coaches in Cybulski, Nate Leighton

and Steve Foley. This past year, due to numbers, New Lebanon just had a boys swim team. Sotek and other girls on the team had to swim with the boys.

For Sotek, that wasn't a problem.

At the Berkshire League Regional Swim Meet in Hudson, N.Y., she helped her team place second in the boys 200 medley relay. She finished third in the boys 100 butterfly and amongst nine swimmers across two heats, had the best time in the boys 100 backstroke by a full three seconds. Not

SOTEK, Page 4

Sotek

FROM PAGE 3

to mention, she was part of the only quartet to do the 400 freestyle in under four minutes.

"I think it went pretty well, I think in the beginning of the year, I felt like I was going to do well. It was a bit of a rough start to the season. I don't know if it was senioritis or something," Sotek added with a chuckle. "Since last year I've definitely progressed more with my swimming and I'm really happy with it."

Right now Sotek is in her taper. The way tapering works is a couple weeks before a big meet, a swimmer does a high yardage number. Then, they'll, well, taper, or swim lower and lower yardage each day. The goal being to keep them in top form while

allowing the body to recover and not be fatigued before a big meet.

It's actually the second taper cycle in a row for Sotek, since Speedo Sectionals were last week and Nationals are coming up. But a full taper should be about two weeks and since those two meets are so close together, it's meant that Cybulski has had some difficult math homework to figure out the best way to help Sotek prepare, not that she minds.

"It takes a village, she is more dedicated than any swimmer I have ever known. And I've been coaching for many, many, many years and I've never met anyone that dedicated," said Cybulski. "It takes a village, her parents are probably the best swim parents I know."

"My parents, I would not be where I was without them," Sotek agreed. "My dad [Jeff] takes me to these meets

and my mom [Christine] makes sure that I'm entered and they help me set my goals and they help me through everything. If I'm having a rough patch through swim, they help me through that. They give me lessons on what I need."

Sotek will leave for North Carolina on Sunday and her first heat will be on Tuesday. She'll be down south for almost a week, from Sunday to the next Saturday thanks to the various events she will be swimming in, something to her benefit as it allows time between race days to recuperate.

She'll be joined by her dad, while Cybulski, Leighton and Foley will surely be waiting at home, staring at the live stats for results.

"There's a lot of us involved," Cybulski said. "We've had a lot of people helping out on the side, making sure she's coached, there's somebody on

deck at all times and she's gone to other coaches... She's had other coaches and teaching over the last couple years so it's pretty cool."

Next week won't be it for Sotek's swim career either. Thanks to her strong showing at Speedo Sectionals, she qualified for USA Futures Championships in late July, where she'd compete in Region 1 in Virginia. After that, she'll be attending SUNY Geneseo after graduation with a plan to study neuroscience while being a part of the Knights' swim team.

As for North Carolina and the prospect of facing some of the best swimmers in the country.

"I'm excited to have competition, I think it pushes me more," said Sotek.

Jesse Kolodkin can be reached at jkolodkin@berkshireeagle.com or on Twitter @JesseKolodkin.