

Nicole Linares, Swimmer

by Gregg Anderson, NISCA E-Mentor Chair



Gregg Anderson - NISCA member, Gregg Anderson is the Varsity Coach at North Brunswick Township High School. He has been there since 1973. Gregg is the NISCA E-Mentor Administrator and the NISCA New Jersey State Delegate.

As a 37 year veteran coach I thought I had experienced just about everything imaginable in coaching. With all that experience I also thought I knew just about everything about competitive swimming. Then I met Nicole Linares. At our pre-season meeting, Nicole came into the pool area along with about 60 other kids getting information about coming out for the swim team. Nicole was different, she was in a wheel chair.

I had seen Nicole around school in her electric wheel chair zooming up and down the halls coming or going to class, but I hadn't met her. I took her sign-up information, and handed her the required permission and physical forms just like every other potential swimmer. Try-out day came and Nicole showed up goggles and cap in hand. I realized at that time I would need a lot more information and a lot more help with this student athlete. I tried to treat Nicole the same as any other athlete trying out for the team.

Nicole's disability is called T.A.R. syndrome a rare genetic bone and blood disorder characterized by the absence of the radius bone in her forearm, and various blood difficulties and other organ and joint problems. She had had several surgeries on knee and other joints which limited her ability to walk.

But Nicole could swim. She learned to swim at age three and loved the water. Obviously the team policy of meeting certain qualifying times to make the team had to be adjusted for Nicole. The lack of radius bones in her arms made her arms short-her hands emerging from her elbow. She took over 75 strokes freestyle in her first 25 yards, could not legally do fly or breaststroke, but she had the ability to swim back stroke.

Nicole and I met after try out day to discuss her being part of the team. She told me much later that she was certain that because of her disabilities she wouldn't be able to make the team. She said she was intimidated and very scared. But she was willing and she had to try. We had a long talk and her goal "to be a part of a team...and to do the best that she could" were goals I could accept. But I also added that she

had to include in her goals events and times she'd like to accomplish.

I know at that point how little I really knew about adjustments to athletes with disabilities and made it a point then to begin consulting with those who later have become my mentors. I spoke to her parents, her adaptive physical education teacher, the school nurse, and

the athletic trainer and I even spoke to one of her doctors over the course of the next four years. I realized that I needed help. So my assistant coach, her parents, the athletic trainer, her physical education teacher gave advice and suggestions and I incorporated these into our plans for Nicole. I needed Mentors!

We adapted her dryland and worked on

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strengthening her core. She did a lot of abdominal work. One day her group was doing a set of stretch-cordz, and I glanced over and saw a team mate and her adjusting the cord, and adapting the exercise to better fit her physique. Kicking with a board was impossible but she could use a pull bouy effectively. We worked on body position and eventually got some propulsion from her legs, though most of the propulsion came from her arms which improved in efficiency over the years.

Nicole and I set goals for 50 and 100 freestyle times and set a goal of improving her backstroke. Her first time trial in the 50 free was over 2:00 and she must have taken close to 200 strokes! By the end of the season her first year, Nicole got her time down to a 1:32, and she got to anchor the C 200 free relay in one of our dual meets. Her relay team mates were supportive and the applause she got from the spectators made her efforts worthwhile.

Nicole was a member of our team for 4 years. She wasn't able to compete all four years because of health set backs and even a couple hospital stays. Her



senior year she mostly helped the team taking splits and working the table at meets, but the most memorable swim Nicole had was in her senior year, when she anchored the 200 free relay. In a bizarre series of events, both my A team and the A team of our opponents disqualified for false starts. The opponent had only two relays entered so our C team got third in the relay and Nicole scored her first ½ point which insured her Varsity Letter.

At awards night Nicole got a standing ovation and the Athletic Directors Cup for winter sports. Her participation on the team taught her teammates the importance of hard work, goal setting, and being part of the team. The most important lesson for me, however, was the importance of asking for help and getting it from those who have the information and the expertise that I lacked. Even the most experienced need help more often than we admit!

Nicole pictured with *Gabrielle Alicino*