

East to Western

Gene pool? Russian emigre finds her niche in water polo.

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Elina Goldenberg was 8 when she was thrown into the pool by one of her father's coaching buddies as he yelled "substitution" during the Sunshine State Games.

It turned out to be a promising start in water polo for the Western High freshman.

"The team [at the Sunshine State Games] was very good, so they could afford to play 5-on-6 defense on one side. I would cherrypick on the other side and they would steal the ball and toss it to me," Goldenberg said. "That was my first game."

Her introduction came even earlier in Moscow, where she was born. Her father, Mike, coached high school- and college-level water polo in Russia and played for the Soviet national team in 1982-85. Elina was 2 when her family decided to emigrate.

Elina swam, played basketball and volleyball and was student council president in middle school before she decided to focus on water polo.

Goldenberg, a teacher at Plantation Middle School, coaches Elina at Western.

"She understood when she decided to go into water polo that because of my background and knowledge I can help and teach her better than somebody else," Goldenberg said.

He said he is harder on her because she is his daughter.

"We have our moments. She is a good kid with good potential. She just lacks experience against the better players."

"I love it when my dad is my coach and actually says 'good job,'" Elina said. "He makes me work twice as hard, but I know it's for my own good."

She started playing seriously in sixth grade for Florida Gold Coast.

Nine months out of the year, she works out against boys on the South Florida Water Polo Club, including top players Jorge Montero and Drac and Janson Wigo from Northeast and Alexandar Proscurshim of Spanish River.

The other three months she trains with her Western teammates.

"The boys are pretty physical, but that's how you improve," said Elina, by now arguably the state's best girl player. "I like everything about this sport, the fact it's a team sport and it's in the water. I am like a fish in the water."

She is one of the most versatile players in high school water polo. She plays every position except goalkeeper. For the U.S. junior national B team, she plays driver.

Elina describes herself as a "normal teenager," hanging out at the mall with friends. She makes straight A's, is working toward valedictorian, and would like to play at Stanford.

"I like stopping a good play on one side on defense and then finishing it off with a good play on offense," she said. "I like the adrenaline rush I get when I play."

For the past two years she has played on the Southeast zone team. She went from not making top 80 at the national tryouts her first year to the B team at last summer's tryouts in LaJolla, Calif.

At 14, Elina was the youngest to make the team and the only player from the southeast.

"I won't rest until I make the A team," she said with a determined look.

"I'm not that far away. A lot of the girls are aging up and getting too old to play for the team, so they're gone and I'm not. I would love to play in the Olympics someday."