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# Olympics 2012: Return home put life back in Hillsborough-native Mike Vernioa's strokes

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By Jackie Friedman/The Star-Ledger

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**UPDATE:** Mike Vernioa finished 72nd in the 400-meter freestyle with a time of 4:01.05.

Mike Vernioa woke up at 5:15 a.m. and robotically walked a mile in minus 15 degrees to the University of Minnesota pool, where he swam back and forth up the lanes for 25 hours a week.

The sport that used to spring him out of bed every morning had become a job. He felt like a businessman putting in his time.

"It's not that I was dreading it," Vernioa said. "I just became numb to it."

The Hillsborough native turned to his high school YMCA coach, hoping to revive all the childlike enthusiasm he was missing. Back in his hometown pool and surrounded by high schoolers as vivacious as he once was, Vernioa came alive.

With his renewed passion, Vernioa is at the Olympic Trials in Omaha, Neb., which start today, where he will compete in the 200 and 400 freestyle.

He's ranked 45th in the 400, with a personal best of 3:56.99 and 74th in the 200, with a personal best of 1:52.01. Only the top two finishers in each event — there are more than 120 entrants in the 200 and 400 free — make the Olympic team.

Knowing he's a longshot, Vernioa views the Olympic Trials as his chance to bring closure to a career that has seen him transform from a high school sophomore who didn't even make the state meet to a 21-year-old man with a presence on the national scene.

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"I just want to go and leave it all in the pool," Vernioa said. "This could be potentially the last



Mike Vernioa, a 22 year old swimmer from Hillsborough, practices at the Hillsborough YMCA for the upcoming U.S. Olympic Trials in Omaha. Noah K. Murray/The Star-Ledger

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meet of my career, and I don't want to have any regrets."

Unlike many of the athletes he'll compete against next week, Vernoia didn't start swimming until he was a sophomore in high school, having spent his free time playing golf and lacrosse. But once he committed, he progressed rapidly. Vernoia won the Somerset County Championship as both a junior and a senior, the first Immaculata High swimmer to do so in 26 years and only the fourth ever.

But he still couldn't capture the attention of the big schools.

He swam for two years at The College of New Jersey, placing second at the Division 3 National Championships in both the 200 free and 500 free his sophomore year.

"He could have stayed there and been a big fish in a little pond," said Matt Donovan, his coach at the Somerset Valley YMCA. "He wanted more. He wanted to dip his toe in the water and see what he could do on the big scene."

Vernoia transferred to Minnesota, adapting to the demands of a Division 1 program, for better or worse. His collegiate career came to an end this March, short of the NCAAs, with a 10th-place finish in the 200 freestyle and 13th-place finish in the 500 freestyle at the Big 10 Championships. When he returned home to New Jersey for spring break weeks after the meet, he spelled out his two goals for the next three months: prepare for the Olympic Trials and make swimming fun again.

With the end in sight, he looked back to the beginning.

"In high school I was immature and liked to cause problems, so (Donovan and I) butted heads from time to time," Vernoia said. "Once my swimming career really took off, our relationship really grew."

With Vernoia in Minnesota, he and Donovan sent text messages before big meets, for quick moments of inspiration. Vernoia would ask for training tips from Donovan — and tell Donovan what his training regimen was, so he could try it with his kids. And they visited every time Vernoia was back east.

When Vernoia needed a coach again, Donovan agreed on the condition that he join the workouts already planned for the high school swimmers at the Y — less time swimming, more time training and weight-lifting on dry land.

The foreign setting full of teenagers has been the perfect antidote to revive Vernoia.

"I see my old self, like that was me a few years ago," he said. "It's really lifted me up, seeing the kids and their passion. I'm getting to really swim for the right reasons again."

Vernoia said he plans to go back to school this fall, adding graduate studies in accounting to the undergraduate degree he has in marketing and management, then "probably get a job or something," he said with a laugh.

But the next chapter will wait until he closes out this one.

"I kind of feel like there is some unfinished business," Vernoia said. "With this, I'll be ending on a high note."

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