

MARK PATTON: The suspense builds for UCSB star May

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An aching back once made UCSB's Anne Marie May feel like she were on a Mission: Impossible every time she dove into a pool.

But now she only looks like Tom Cruise when she's training with Redcord, a neuromuscular system from Norway that often suspends the Gauchos' All-America swimmer above the floor in a contraption of straps and pulleys.

"I've tried to explain it to other athletes, because I think it could help so many of them who live with chronic pain," May said.

"You see the stirrups and the straps and you go, 'Uh oh,'" UCSB coach Gregg Wilson said. But "Operation Redcord" is what, as Wilson calls it, "The edge she needs to elevate to the next level."

"I told them, 'If you can make her better by tying her up, then let's do it,'" he said. "And it's worked out really well."

The evidence is in May's record-setting time of 50.80 seconds to win the 100 freestyle at last weekend's dual meet at Nevada-Las Vegas.

"That's her first time under 51 seconds," he said. "It's a milestone, a significant achievement. It kind of reminds me of Jason."

That would be Gaucho alum Jason Lezak of Olympic fame -- the anchor leg of two of Michael Phelps' gold-medal relays last summer.

May, a junior who took third place in the 50 free at last year's NCAA championships, also won that event at UNLV last weekend. And she has high hopes for this year's NCAA meet, which will be held next month in College Station, Tex.

"This treatment has been absolutely the best thing that's ever happened to me," she said. "I've never felt this good. I've gotten to know my body better throughout my athletic career, but I didn't even know how good I could feel."

"I've seen increases in comfort level and in my training potential. I've been able to achieve things in my training that I've never even touched before, and I would definitely attribute it to this."

Redcord has been used in Norway for the last 18 years but was only recently introduced to the United States. Oyvind Pedersen, the director of Redcord Clinics in the United States, brought it to Santa Barbara last year, and they moved their clinic into the Page Center on Hollister Avenue just this month.

"There are several sports that have done studies showing that it's achieved almost immediate enhancement -- in golf swing, soccer kick, handball throw," said therapist Kristina Marcussen, one of the Redcord experts.

Baseball throw, too, if UCSB pitcher Chris Joyce is any proof. The freshman from Dos Pueblos High was struggling with hamstring and back problems all last year before he was referred to Redcord.

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"He's pretty close to pain-free now," said Gary Lemons, Redcord's director of business development and a former DP athlete himself. "He's working out with a mini (unit) now, and he's come in a few times, and it's made a huge difference for him."

May said her back problems "began firing up" while she was playing water polo at UCSB during her freshman year. It continued when she transitioned to swimming. She had to scratch herself from several meets.

"I was doing some butterflies, and that was really hard on my back," she said. "That's when I really felt the pain and was too uncomfortable to continue."

Pedersen said that May's problem is a common one for many athletes:

"They are so strong in their specific core muscles and they get a firing pattern and use those muscles instead of the deep, stabilizing ones," he said. "The deep muscles are so much more important for keeping the correct posture."

"We're able to change that pattern and get the deep muscles to fire. Then she can utilize the power she has and the core she has in the other muscles to do what they're supposed to do in the water."

The Redcord system puts the patient in the proper position for the therapist to "activate" specific muscles with pressure. Lemons said they've achieved success with young athletes all the way up to a 93-year-old local woman who had injured her shoulder in a fall.

"Oyvind did an evaluation, worked on her shoulder for about 15-20 minutes, and all of a sudden, she lifted her arm completely over her head to the sky," he said. "Even the therapists' jaws dropped."

Lemons said there is also a fitness application to Redcord.

"There are over 800 different exercises you can do with the Redcord unit," he said. "We have pictures of soccer players strapping it over goal posts and doing it right there on the field."

May brought a mini unit with her to the Husky Invitational in Washington so she could work out in her hotel bathroom.

"You can loop it over a shower-curtain rod, or in the closet or somewhere where you have a bar, and do your own exercises," she said. "I used it in the shower because I was too long and too awkward to get into a closet, plus it would look silly."

At least you can lock a bathroom door behind you.

"I'm just so thankful for the treatment that I've gotten here and so blown away by the results and success," she said. "My coach, Naya (Higashijima), is wonderful, too -- we have a good give-and-take and an open dialogue about how we're feeling."

"My coaches are really flexible."

And thanks to a bunch of cords and pulleys, she knows that feeling.