



*Photo courtesy of University of Pittsburgh Athletics*

*By Datti Jinkiri*

The sport of swimming is in the world's spotlight every four years due to its prominence in the Olympic Games. That will be the case this summer. However, a Clinton swimmer has shown his prowess outside of the Olympics. Blaise Vera has quietly taken his place amongst the fastest swimmers in not only the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), but the world.

Vera has had a storied four-year career at the University of Pittsburgh. The 2021 season was the culmination of all of his hard work as he became the school's first NCAA First Team All-American swimmer since 1980.

The top-eight finishers in each NCAA Swimming and Diving Championship event are rewarded with the honor of NCAA First Team All-American. Vera tallied a seventh-place finish in the 50-yard freestyle with a time of 19.39 seconds.

He also finished in twelfth-place in the 100-yard freestyle, earning NCAA Honorable Mention All-American status in that event as a result. He earned 17 points for the Panthers, finishing as the team's top scorer in the championship. Twelve points came as a result of the 50-yard freestyle, and five points came from the 100-yard freestyle.

Vera was also a part of the Panthers' 200 Medley Relay team. Though the team did not earn any points, Vera's butterfly split of 19.52 seconds was the third-fastest split EVER recorded. Singaporean gold medalist Joseph Schooling has the two-fastest splits, so Vera is the fastest American ever.

"It was really cool to have reached my long-time goal of placing at NAAs," Vera said. "I always have pretty high goals, so I don't want to say it was expected, but I was going to find a way to do it one way or another. I can't complain about being an All-American and the fastest American 50 flyer, that's for sure."

This was the third-straight season that Vera qualified for the NCAA Swimming and Diving Championships. Though he hadn't placed in his previous two championships, he approached this year the same as any other year.

"I didn't really do anything special," he stated. "Obviously, things were different due to COVID-19, but I'm never the kind of person to get nervous or anxious at big meets. I normally just try to go with the flow of everything."

Vera began the season by helping the Panthers defeat rival West Virginia in a dual meet. He won the 50-yard freestyle and 100-yard freestyle races, while helping the 200-yard medley team to another win.

A team win over Army on Senior Day followed, with Vera topping the 50-yard freestyle and 100-yard freestyle fields. He also helped the 200-yard medley and 200-yard freestyle relay teams to wins, as well.

After the Army meet, the postseason began. At the ACC Championships in Greensboro, North Carolina, Vera became the first Pittsburgh swimmer to

win three ACC medals in a career since the program entered the conference in the 2013-14 season. He finished in third place in the 100-yard freestyle.

Vera's season continued on an upward trend, and his great performance in the NCAA Swimming and Diving Championships followed.

However, success didn't only come recently for Vera. He first rose to prominence as a 16-year-old, when he qualified for 2016 United States Olympic Trials in Omaha, Nebraska.

He had been competing with the Clinton High School and the Mississippi Makos swim teams at the time. His coaches on the high school team were Brian and Eddie Ware, and Vera says that their approach to coaching had a positive effect on his career.

"I loved them [Brian and Eddie Ware] as coaches, because they never pushed me to do anything outside of what I wanted to do," Vera stated. "They gave me free reign with my training as well, which was important to me."

Vera graduated from Clinton High School in 2017 as the state's top swimming recruit. He set state records in the 50-meter freestyle and 100-meter freestyle.

Though Vera had plenty of collegiate suitors, he eventually decided on the University of Pittsburgh. He came to that decision because he liked the school, plus his parents had enjoyed living in the area previously. While attending Pittsburgh, Vera says that he learned a lot about himself and what he needs have the greatest amount of success.

"In the pool, I've gained a better understanding of my body and what I need to do to boost my own performance," he said. "I also learned that you need to find a program that understands you and your knowledge of yourself and what you need to do to progress."

Vera was no doubt a success in the Pittsburgh. He finished his Panther career with three school records, three ACC Championship medals, and 30 individual/relay victories.

He graduated in May with a Bachelor's Degree in communication, but he has yet to make a decision about his future. Due to the pandemic, he is eligible for a fifth year of competition. His four-year career in the Steel City would make him an attractive addition to many of the top swimming programs in the country.

"I do get an extra fifth year; and, if I were to claim it, I'd probably transfer to somewhere in the SEC, because I don't think there is anything left for me to do at Pitt," Vera said.

"Unfortunately, there isn't a lot to professional swimming, and you can't make enough money to sustain yourself. I currently have a job as general manager of an LA Fitness in Pittsburgh, so after being in this position for a while I'll wait and decide what to do next!"