Along with her fans, swimmer plunges into new sport

By NANCY SMIRIL JORGENSEN

After 13 years of poolside cheering, we are learning how to applaud in the woods and on the track. Familiar with the essentials of swimming, we know all the cheers. "Kick," "Send her," and "Get a good turn" are part of our competition vocabulary. Now we are on the fast track to learning land race lingo.

Gwen discovered swimming in second grade and immediately fell in love. Her devotion to water was all consuming. Season to season, she went from outdoor pool to indoor lanes. In third grade, she spent her days learning cursive and her evenings studying starting-block form.

In high school, she was in the pool year-round, six days a week, twice a day. I suggested she spend more time having fun, enjoying high school's social opportunities. She told me she was doing just that — in the pool. There was nothing she would rather do than pull water in the same 25-yard lane, over and over.

Knowing how fast she could move through water, she set out to determine how fast her legs could move on land.

Her love affair continued at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she swam for the Badgers. While fellow college students kept late hours, emerging from bed long after the sun was up, Gwen kept a strict schedule of bedtimes at 9, rising early to be at the pool by 6 a.m. Most days she was back in the water by 2:45. Weekends at home were scheduled around mandatory Saturday morning practices.

This demanding schedule would fulfill most athletes' need for physical activity, but Gwen is always ready for more. Swimmers cross-trained on the track. Those laps were just enough to make her crave a bigger dose of running. After 13 years in the pool, Gwen challenged herself. Knowing how fast she could move through water, she set out to determine how fast her legs could move on land.

This devoted Badger swimmer became a devoted Badger runner. A junior at Madison, with two more years of eligibility, she set out training in the woods and on the track.

Accustomed to four or five hours in the pool, Gwen needed to modify her relentless approach. Running on knees, hips, and ankles is more stressful than moving those same parts through water. Like many competitors, Gwen was familiar with pain, and quick to ignore it. But overworked tendons, joints, and bones are at risk for injury. A moderate, controlled approach to getting in running shape became a critical challenge.

Gwen's quick sprints, long jogs and daily runs resulted in accomplishments. Top 20 at the Big Ten Conference Cross-Country meet, and top 11 at the Great Lakes Regional meet, she was UW-Madison's No. 2 cross-country runner for much of the season. Her goal to run at the NCAA Cross Country Championship meet became a reality, too.

While friends and family rave about her accomplishments, Gwen remains less than satisfied: went out too fast; started the final sprint too soon; failed to concentrate on position within the course. Rarely does she approve of her own race. But she has found a new sport to love. A fresh challenge, spirited teammates and an imaginative coaching staff give Gwen exactly what she craves.

This new sport requires new fan skills. Spectators at a cross-country race incorporate body language into cheering. They bend low, jump side to side and point frequently. They shout, "Catch that runner," and "Every place counts."

While swimming aficionados follow events from a bleacher seat, cross-country fans are on the move, dodging runners before, during and after the race. Runners explore the terrain, unconcerned about wandering spectators, forcing fans to fend for themselves.

A morning on the cross-country course offers other sensations: wet shoes from dewy grass, the scent of fresh manure from a nearby farm, warm sun on the face while a chilly breeze blows.

An athletic season spent outdoors made us confirm cross-country fans. We still recall the tang of chlorine, but more recent memories are of golden leaves on the trees of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana. We remember how to take splits for a 5-kilometer swim, but now can estimate the 3k mark on a golf-course turned race-course.