

Olympic gold medalist Natalie Coughlin gives pointers to swimmers in Berkeley

By Kristin Bender

BERKELEY — Here's the difference between male and female Olympic gold medal swimmers: several thousand calories a day.

Natalie Coughlin, the most decorated female swimmer at last year's Olympics, was at the Downtown Berkeley YMCA on Wednesday evening handing out advice and cheering on swimmers participating in this week's swim-a-thon. More than two dozen people are swimming 4,400 laps, or about 60 miles, through Saturday to raise \$3,500 for YMCA summer camp programs.

The 100 or so people who turned out to see Coughlin, 26, and four swimmers on the UC Berkeley women's swim team, were happy to listen but also had some questions for the women.

"How did you learn to swim?" "Where did you learn to swim?" "What keeps you motivated," were some of the questions, but one little guy wanted to know if any of the long and lean women athletes smoke cigarettes. That question got a resounding "no" and a short lecture about the importance of staying away from tobacco.

Coughlin, who won one gold, two silver and three bronze medals at last year's Olympic Games, also was questioned about her daily diet while training rigorously.

"Well," said the bubbly and poised East Bay native. "I subscribe to a Community Supported Agriculture (service), so I get a box of fresh fruits and vegetables every week. I try to remind

myself of portion (control), and I eat a lot of whole grains, lean meat and as organically as I can."

Far different from the diet of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, who has been known to ingest 12,000 calories a day by scarfing down fried-egg sandwiches loaded with cheese, fried onions and mayonnaise, a five-egg omelet, chocolate-chip pancakes, mounds of pasta, ham and cheese sandwiches, and entire pizzas.

Since the Olympic Games, Coughlin said she has been taking a break from the pool, instead running to stay in shape.

"I'm giving my shoulders a much-needed rest," she said. In the fall, she'll pick up serious pool training again, working toward qualifying for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, she said.

Asked what inspires her to hit the pool for hours at a time every day, she said, "I get to do (swimming) as my job. I get to be in the sun, travel, work hard and meet people from all over the world. I've been given so many opportunities and had so many doors opened to me because of swimming."

Coughlin, who graduated from UC Berkeley in 2004 with a degree in psychology, holds world, American and U.S. Open records in various events and has 11 Olympic medals. She was the first woman to win a 100-meter backstroke gold medal in two consecutive Olympic Games — Athens and Beijing.

Although Coughlin's Wikipedia entry on the Internet says she started swimming at a local YMCA when she was 10 months old, "That's not true," she said.

"I started my gymnastics career at the YMCA, and I thought I was quite a

good gymnast, but I wasn't," she said.

She said she started swimming seriously at a club in Vallejo, where she was born.

"I wasn't the best land athlete, and so my parents (put) me in the pool, and that is where my athletic talents emerged," she said.

Also on hand for swim-a-thon inspiration Wednesday were Cal swimmers Sara Isakovic, originally from Slovenia; Madison Kennedy of Connecticut; Blake Hayter from San Diego; and Hannah Wilson of Hong Kong. Under the coaching of Teri McKeever, the team last month claimed its first victory at the National Collegiate Athletic Association Women's Swimming Championship.

McKeever, a swim coach for 25 years, said her coaching style is in the spirit of the YMCA.

"My goal is to find young women who are willing to develop as a whole person and become a whole athlete," she said. "The idea of developing the whole body, mind and spirit is what the YMCA represents, and I would like to see that the direction that swimming goes."

The swim-a-thon, the Downtown Berkeley YMCA's first, also includes swim clinics, group swims and water-safety demonstrations. It was designed to raise awareness and funds for summer camp for low-income children, said Kevin Kosik, Berkeley-Albany YMCA's chief development director.

As of late Thursday, swimmers had swum 3,250 of the 4,400 goal laps, Kosik said. "We have some swimmers doing 30 laps (for the week) and some swimming 600," he said.