

Downing strikes gold at Mel Zajac

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By Tom Patrick

An 11-time Olympic medalist is just one of the star swimmers three Yukoners were taking on at the Mel Zajac Jr. International, one of the biggest meets on Canada's swim calendar, last weekend in Vancouver.

Whitehorse native MacKenzie Downing, who swims for UVic's Pacific Coast Swimming, showed why the 200-metre butterfly is her best event, winning gold.

"We're in a pretty heavy workload right now and we're in in-season right now, and I was really happy with the race," said the 24-year-old. "I was happy with all my results on the weekend, so that was good."

In addition to American Olympic marvel Natalie Coughlin, the ultra-fast University of California team was in attendance at the meet, which hosted about 400 of the continent's best. For the gold Downing defeated American Caitlin Leverenz, who swims for the University of California and has won gold at the Pan American Games and two bronzes at the Pan Pacific Championships.

"Natalie Coughlin is an 11-time Olympic medalist and I swam against her in some of the freestyles, so there was a really high calibre of athletes to compete against," said Downing. "They race really well in-season. In the states you really have to be on your game every time you swim. So going into it I was more thinking about racing them and racing hard.

"So beating them is a really good step for me."

Downing, who was recently added to the Team Canada roster for the Summer Universiade, also came fourth in the 100 fly, ninth in the 50 fly and 200-metre freestyle, 10th in the 50 free (with a personal best time), and 15th in the 100 free.

"I was kind of nervous going into the meet because I've been kind of getting over being sick," said Downing. "So I'm really happy with the position I'm in and am looking forward to the rest of the summer."