



Rebekah Zaiser

5-2 Senior
Mars, PA

Anyone who gets the chance to sit and talk with Rebekah Zaiser for a few minutes will understand she is a highly-intelligent, driven young-woman with a good heart and a close-knit family.

Back in 2006, the ambitious Pennsylvania native took a big step when she left the familiar surroundings of her home up north to set foot on a campus of roughly 51,000 students. As a self-described little fish in a big pond, Zaiser was unsure of what to expect.

Four years later, the senior has made a splash both as a gymnast and an academic.

In the classroom, Zaiser has excelled. The pre-professional biology student carries a 3.97 grade point average. In 2008, she became the first-ever Gator to be named SEC Gymnastics Scholar-Athlete of the Year and has been an SEC Academic Honor Roll member every year as a Gator. This fall, she was accepted into the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Science for Life Undergraduate Research program.

“It’s pretty strenuous for an athlete to keep up with it,” she admits, “but you learn time management.”

The three-time NACGC Scholastic All-American has already been accepted to five medical programs, Case Western, Florida, Jefferson University, Ohio State and Virginia, and is currently waiting to hear from the University of Pennsylvania and University of Pittsburgh. With factors ranging from curriculum, athletics, tuition and community involvement to consider, one has been constant on the effect of her decision.

“I want to go home, but if it’s not meant to be, it’s not meant to be,” Zaiser said. “I was home-schooled until college, so my brothers and I are extremely close. Except when we were at practice, we were always together. They are both gymnasts as well, so it’s nice, because we can talk about our experiences, our meets, our hopes and dreams. If we feel frustrated, we have someone we can go to right away.”

Her relationship with her parents is equally as strong.

“My brothers always tease me about being a lot like my mom,” she said with a smile. “She finished all her pre-med requirements in three years and went to

med school. It's funny, because my mom is the Type A, take control, this is the plan type of person and my dad is much more suggestive in his approach to diplomatic relations. Both my parents were athletes, but my mom used to do triathlons. She still runs and bikes like crazy. She took sixth in her age group at the Ironman in Kona, Hawaii, and finished the Boston Marathon in less than three hours. We're going to try to do a triathlon together this summer, if I can get in shape for it. Gymnastics requires a different kind of conditioning than triathlons do, so she'll be pushing me."

With both her parents working in hospital settings, it seemed natural that Zaiser would follow their footsteps into the medical field. She spent the last four summers shadowing in the Allegheny General Emergency Department. Last summer, she also was a project volunteer in the UPMC Emergency Medicine Residency Program.

"At Pitt, I experienced several different hospitals to get a feel for the different medical settings," she said. "Last summer, I spent a lot of time in the ER department where my mom works. I did research and was involved with several projects under residents there. At one of the procedure labs where they practice on cadavers, I inserted a central line and a chest tube under the residents' supervision. I think they really enjoyed having the chance to show someone how it was done, since they were usually the pupil. The first six months of med school are spent dissecting, so it was good to get a taste of it, because that's what I'll be doing in the fall."

For now, the soon-to-be med-student is undecided on which type of medicine she will pursue.

"I think most athletes think they want to stay in orthopedics or sports medicine," Zaiser said. "I really like orthopedics, because I think I would really like working with younger people and athletes who would have a lot of motivation to get back to their sport and rehab hard. However, I had a really good time shadowing my mom in the ER this summer. As an athlete, I love that adrenaline rush you get in ER. You never know what is going to come through the doors. You have to be ready for everything. You have to think on your feet and be calm, but also really know what you are doing. I'm going in with an open mind, because I hear everyone changes their mind anyway."

With a few months before she puts on the white jacket, Zaiser and her teammates have come up with few things they would like to do together before they say goodbye to Gainesville.

"My roommates and I have been spending a lot of time having dinners, relaxing by the pool and going for walks," she said. "It has been nice. We painted the 34th Street Wall prior to the meet versus Georgia. Also, even at 22, I've never been to a concert. Recently, they took me to go to see Michael Bublé. We are

also going to try to get down to Sarasota and hang out at Ashley Kerr's favorite beach, Siesta Key, before we leave."

Zaiser already has some memories she will cherish forever.

"I think the things you remember most are the small things, your teammates and friends, working hard in the gym and the moments when things were tough and someone pulled out a joke to make everyone laugh," she recalled. "The bonding, the tailgating in the fall and saying our prayer in the locker room before meets, all of those things you remember well. To think this weekend will be my last time running out from the inflatable gator head is a heart breaker. The fans and those moments out on the floor have been unbelievable. An athlete could not ask for anything more."

There is plenty of life still in her career as a Gator. Two weeks ago, the senior set an all-time personal best on the balance beam when she scored a 9.95.

"I was really excited about my performance," Zaiser recalled. "I have always wanted to break a 9.90 on beam, so it was a thrill to finally score that high. The team had such a good night too. All that positive energy heading into the event really helped me nail the routine."

The performance was something the former U.S Junior National Team member was never quite sure would happen.

"I was injured last year, didn't compete after the first meet and I did not know I would make it back. I wasn't even able to do a cartwheel on the beam this fall. To get that score, I felt like it was the culmination of all the hard work put into the fight to come back."

"Last year, there were quite a few times when I was attending another sport's games and fans would come up to me tell me how sorry they were I was injured, that they were praying for me to come back and knew I would be able to contribute next year and they were proud of the fact I was still at the meets cheering on the team. That experience was always really touching, because it showed me that it isn't just about athletics for our fans. They really care about our own hopes and dreams and about us as people. It's amazing how much people rally behind the Gators."