Young waterski team features mostly international students

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The Ragin' Cajuns Waterski team has found success throughout the fall season with first place finishes at the 2017 Texas Water Ski Fall Classic on Sept. 20 and the Hog Wild tournament hosted by the University of Arkansas on Oct. 4.

The Cajuns are currently ranked second in the country behind the University of Alabama, according to the National Collegiate Water Ski Association.

The team qualified for nationals on Oct. 19-21 in Zachary, Louisiana, and two members credited a fun team environment and an improved program chemistry for their accomplishments.

Freshman Bailey Austin, majoring in kinesiology, grew up around water skiing in Austin, Texas. She started water skiing at two years old and has been led by coaches to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

"I knew this school had a great water ski program so I've always looked at Louisiana," Austin said.

Austin has gotten off to a hot start with the program, as she has taken first in women's slalom at the 2017 Texas Water Ski Fall Classic and the Hog Wild tournament.

"(Slalom) is what I've always focused on. That's what I've always been good at," Austin said.

She is one of 11 freshmen on the team. With 17 eligible members on the Cajuns Water Ski team, there are a lot of new faces. The collegiate inexperience for these freshmen compared to junior and senior water skiers provides a fresh environment in the program.

"It's fun and serious," Austin said.

"We know when to be fun and when to take it serious."

Carlo Basic, sophomore marketing major from Austria, is in his second season with the Cajuns and after being an all-star last season, he said he feels the need to improve by seeing how competitive his teammates are.

"All the time." Basic said about how often his teammates compete with each other. "The guys out there and the girls are pushing each other. It's competitive and we improve a lot through that."

The Louisiana water ski program brought Basic to the university, as well. He believes the way the program runs and the way the team trains is his type of game.

For Basic, the team is a lot different from last year's. The haul of freshmen from all different parts of the world creates an unique program experience.

"Last year we were a lot of seniors. It was all very routine," Basic said. "Everyone knew what was going on. This year we have a lot of new people. It's good. It's new."

"This year we have German skiers. We have people from Great Britain. We have two French skiers, one Canadian. We're very international," Basic added.

The presence of international athletes can create a language barrier between the team. With Austin being from Texas and Basic from Austria, communication can be difficult, but the athletes make it work.

"We like each other so we sift through and figure it out," Austin said.

The Cajuns are coached by Ryan Gonzales and led by team captain Taryn Grant. The student-athletes are able to focus on their game and performance because of Gonzales' leadership.

Basic believes Gonzales means "everything" to this program and Austin echoes the sentiment from her teammate.

"(Gonzales) recognizes we know how to run our own program and we know how much we need to train in order to be successful," Austin said. "He lets us handle that and he takes care of everything we can't. All we have to do is focus on our game."

Most people may not know that the UL Lafayette has a water ski program. The athletes, however, are still finding success while flying under the radar.

The consisteny of the team this season and the individual performances are not affected by the lack of knowledge of a water ski team. Basic believes the program should be talked about more, but uses this as motivation toward garnering more achievements for the water ski program.

"We're not a NCAA sport which is a downgrade, but the way we run the program and the success of the team we
definitely have the potential to get more coverage," Basic said. "I feel like that’s our goal to achieve. We’ll have to earn it."