

CIEPLUCHA SETS SIGHTS ON OLYMPICS AFTER PAN AM GOLD

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Heading into her first major multi-sport Games and her first senior national team competition, Tessa Cieplucha was hoping to make a splash.

But it was the lack of splash that let her know she was on track to win Canada's only swimming gold medal at the Pan Am Games.

Since setting four personal bests at the Canadian swim trials in April, training had been going well. The Georgetown swimmer had put in a lot of work on the butterfly and backstroke - the two strokes that lead off her specialty, the 400-metre individual medley.

"I was just excited to be going," the 20-year-old said. "I had a lot of confidence going in. Meeting

with my coaches to plan my races and knowing I had so many people supporting me made me feel pretty good."

Thoughts of returning home with a medal had occasionally crossed her mind, but she tried not to dwell on it for fear of jinxing it. It was hard to ignore, though, as she made the turn in the breaststroke in the medley final in Lima, Peru.

"At 250 m, halfway through the breaststroke, I didn't see much splash. That's usually how you tell where you are," she said. "I got that rush that I was in the lead."

Cieplucha had opened up a 1.24 second lead on American Alexandra Szekely, a member of the NCAA champion Stanford swimming team.

Szekely, racing well out of sight in the outside lane,

was one of the swimmers Cieplucha and her coaches had talked about before the race. The book on her was that the first two strokes were her best - the exact opposite of Cieplucha, who closed with her best two.

"For months coming up to the Games I had been working on butterfly and backstroke," said Cieplucha, who will start her junior season at the University of Tennessee this week. "I was happy to have someone to race in the race in the first half."

Cieplucha was fourth, 1.17 seconds back after the butterfly, but still within striking distance with her best strokes still to come; she wouldn't have to wait for them, though.

Midway through the backstroke, she had sliced the lead in half and moved into second. By the time they reached the other end



David Jackson/COC

Georgetown's Tessa Cieplucha competes in the 400-metre individual medley final at the Pan Am Games. Competing for Canada's senior national team for the first time, Cieplucha won Canada's only swimming gold medal.

of the pool, Cieplucha had taken the lead thanks to the fastest backstroke time.

She was again the fastest on the breaststroke, extending her lead from a

tenth of a second to 1.54 seconds. That lead grew again on the first half of the freestyle, until her pace caught up to her.

"That last 50 m hurt a lot, more than it usually

does," Cieplucha said. "I just put my head down went for the finish."

Though Virginia Bardach, an Argentine Olympian, closed the gap, Cieplucha finished in 4:41.05 to win comfortably by 1.15 seconds to claim what would be Canada's only swimming go.

"I looked over at the other Canadian (bronze medalist Mary-Sophie Harvey) and she had the biggest smile on her face," Cieplucha said. "It was a surreal moment, it's the biggest Games, the biggest meet I've ever been to."

Cieplucha hopes it doesn't remain that way for long.

"Definitely having done that, even though the time wasn't super special, just getting that experience under my belt, it gives me a lot more confidence going into the Olympic trials."

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