

SOFLO's Alia Atkinson Makes Third Olympic Team On Final Day Of Santa Clara Grand Prix

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Alia Atkinson picked the right time to find her stroke, regain her confidence and swim one of the finest races of her life.

The South Florida Aquatic Club swimmer qualified for her third Jamaican Olympic team Sunday at the Santa Clara International Grand Prix.

Atkinson, 23, was second in the 100-meter breaststroke in a lifetime-best 1:08.45, well under the FINA "A" qualifying standard of 1:08.49 for the 2012 London Olympics. Her previous best was 1:08.86.

Australian veteran Leisel Jones, 26, a four-time Olympian, Olympic and world multi-gold medalist and record breaker, finished first in 1:07.37, the 13th fastest time in the world.

It is the first time Atkinson made the medal stand in a USA Swimming Grand Prix event and first time she has made the "A" standard in any event for the Olympics.

Swimming in Lane 7, Atkinson went out fast in 32.12, second fastest at the turn behind Jones (31.87). She brought it home in 36.33, third-fastest against an experienced field.

"I am excited and happy to be going to the Olympics," said Atkinson, who was 15 at her first Olympics. "They all have a special meaning but this one I can actually do something. I can set my goals which is to make semifinals and finals."

Atkinson made the FINA time standard just sixteen days before the June 18 qualifying deadline.

"I knew what I was capable of and I actually did it," Atkinson said.

“The main difference is that I found a stroke I have confidence in and able to hold longer,” Atkinson said. “Usually I try to rush my race and my stroke gets into the sprint mode a little bit quicker.

“After watching the Australians and Canadians in their races and on film, we noticed they keep the same stroke they do for the 200. They just put a little more effort into front pull. I do have a lot of power in my arms and legs for the longer distance. I tried it and it worked out. You always keep learning.”

Until Sunday, Atkinson was having mixed results in Santa Clara. On Friday, she was disqualified in the 200-meter breaststroke on a controversial call and the following day won the “C” final in the 50-meter freestyle in 26.28.

“I was a little bit down after the 200,” Atkinson admitted. “I was a little upset for sure. I was a little bit nervous going into the 100. I know I can do more now when I am tapered. I know what I have to work on and I know what I can do. This does help my confidence.”

The veteran women’s field brought out the best in Atkinson. “The majority of the swimmers were 28, 27 and 25 and it just shows me it does take a while,” Atkinson said. “The Aussie went 1:05 when she was 28. It does show that with age you can get better and to keep going. I was tired of going into these big races and not producing or moving in the direction I should be doing. I know I can get faster.”

Her longtime coach Chris Anderson was happy with her confidence-building swim and even more encouraged about the next five weeks of training.

“I think this just leads into the potential she has going into London,” Anderson said. “Look at the race, the first four strokes off the start and first four off the wall, she was competing and beating one of the best swimmers in the world. She can step it up and be a contender in the Olympics, and this proves it.”

After morning prelims, Atkinson focused on her stroke for finals.

“We watched the Aussies on film and implemented what we saw,” Anderson said. “Her mood was more confident for finals. We changed her stroke after this morning to get a little more power out of her kick. She is confident with the stroke she has. The next step is to take that stroke with that kick and get in a good five weeks of training, another meet with trials and finals and a training camp in London. I am excited for her.”

Atkinson saw a familiar face on the medal stand when Pine Crest Swimming coach and former Santa Clara coach Jay Fitzgerald awarded the top three medals for the women’s breaststroke.