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GLENN KOENIG *Los Angeles Times*
DOING HER PART: Elliko Heimbach, who soon will return home to Tokyo, is the top girls butterfly swimmer at Irvine, *The Times'* top-ranked team in the Southland.

AT HOME IN FAST LANE

Heimbach, on a year-long visit from Tokyo, is thriving at Irvine

BY DAN ARRITT,
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Just as swiftly as Elliko Heimbach has made a name for herself on the Irvine High girls' swim team, she will soon be another one simply to remember.

Although she knew nothing about Irvine when she arrived last summer from her lifelong home on the Yokota Air Base in Tokyo, Heimbach has become the top butterfly competitor on a Vaquero team that's not only No. 1 in *The Times'* Southland rankings but is favored to win its seventh consecutive Southern Section Division I title.

But Heimbach, a sophomore, is nearing the end of her family's one-year stay in Southern California.

Rick Heimbach, Elliko's father, is a civilian employed by the Defense Department and is on sabbatical while studying computer science at UC Irvine. Her mother, Naomi, is a former Masters world record-holder in the 50-meter breaststroke, and her 10-year-old sister, Mariko, is an aspiring figure skater.

Shortly after the family's arrival in July, Heimbach and her parents searched the Internet for swim opportunities and came upon the Irvine Novaquatics.

One of the premier clubs in the nation, the Novaquatics immediately accepted Heimbach, who had been ranked No. 1 in the nation in the 100 freestyle for the 9-10 age group by USA Swimming.

During her first workout, Heimbach shared a lane with Aaron Peirsol, the world record holder in the 200-meter backstroke. She tried to keep up.

"All of a sudden, I was with all these people I had only seen in swimming magazines," Heimbach said. "I thought I had to be as fast as everybody, so I swam a lot faster. It was hard for me. I was out of breath."

When it later became time to choose a high school, Heimbach had options. Irvine University was the closest to Heimbach's home, but she had befriended several teammates on the Novaquatics and followed them to Irvine.

Heimbach is one of the favorites to win the Division I title in the 100 butterfly. Her personal-best time of 56.44 seconds is second in the Southland this season to the 55.92 turned in by Sarah Colvin of Quartz Hill.

Heimbach also has produced one of the region's leading times in the 200 freestyle (1:53.25).

Irvine's 200 medley relay team broke the national high school record twice last season, and Flora Kong, who swam the butterfly leg, was its only senior.

Enter Heimbach, whose best time is 0.57 seconds slower than Kong's. However, Irvine Coach Scott Hinman said they are about even for this time of the season.

"It's very exciting to know I can swim with the rest of the [relay] team," she said.

The Vaqueros will make a run at breaking their record time of 1:43.71 on Saturday in the finals of the Santa Ana Foothill Swim Games. The team's best time this season is 1:49.49.

However, a better chance may come in the Southern Section finals May 16 at Long Beach Belmont Plaza.

Heimbach's high school in Japan does not have a swim team. She said some of her biggest thrills have come from competing against other high schools and hearing her name announced before races.

"They always add these funny comments that make me laugh before a race," she said. "One time, my teammates wrote that I have the world record for asking too many questions."

Before Wednesday's 114-56 victory over sixth-ranked Foothill, Hinman said of Heimbach: "What's refreshing is how naive she is about these types of competitions. This is a big reason why she wanted to experience high school swimming, because of meets like these."

Heimbach swam the 100 and 500 free against the Knights, winning the races in 53.87 and 5:09.75.

Several teammates who would like to see Heimbach finish high school in Irvine have offered her room and board, and while she says the invitations are tempting, she also misses her friends and her grandmother in Japan.

She doesn't plan to leave California permanently, however.

"Knowing I can come back for college makes it a little easier to leave," she said.