

Newark swim standouts putting in extra time in pool

Kurt Snyder, ksnyder@newarkadvocate.com 12:47 a.m. EST December 18, 2014



(Photo: Michael Lehmkuhle/The Advocate)

NEWARK – Whether it be on the course or in the pool, Newark senior Rebekah Wheeler has learned a universal truth.

“I run cross country and track also, and I think I’ve learned a lot from running,” Wheeler said. “When I first started, I didn’t try that hard, and I didn’t improve. When I started working really hard, I improved a lot. That is something I brought to swimming. It just carried over.”

That little bit of desire has changed everything for Wheeler. She went from a swimming “newbie” as coach Kris Read calls them to a recruit in two short seasons.

Wheeler began swimming as a way to stay in shape during the offseason between cross country and track. The sport did not take long to grab hold of her, and she now is working with Read on potentially finding a college fit.

“It was just something I wanted to try, and now, I really love it,” said Wheeler, who is going to attempt to do the 200 individual medley, the one of the sport’s most difficult events, this season.

The pipeline from the cross country and track teams has been a good one for Read, who now is in his third season. The cross country teams practice before school, so the athletes do not balk at the 5:30 a.m. practices four days a week nor do they complain when Read says one more stroke or one more length.

With sophomore Hannah Dehus returning from injury, the Wildcats are able to put together a solid relay or two. Wheeler said she enjoys those most pressure-packed events.

"Relays definitely help because you don't want to disappoint your teammates," Wheeler said. "For an individual race, you might be feeling bad, and you don't go out as hard as possible. For a relay, your whole team is on the line, and you don't want to mess that up."

Newark has just 12 swimmers this season, including just two boys, but that has not stopped the Wildcats from dreaming big. Junior Philip Hall has his sights set on the 100 backstroke record.

Hall blew away the field in the Viking Splash on Dec. 6, winning by six seconds and coming within one second of the record, which sits at 1:01.

"That's one of my main goals this season," Hall said. "I would like to leave a mark on this team. I am closest to the 100 back, so I would like to get that. It takes a lot of work, but I'm getting there."

The surprise for Hall has been the event. Hall is a strong distance swimmer and also had seen the butterfly as a specialty. Read and Pau Hana club coach Teresa Fightmaster helped Hall on the backstroke during the offseason, and it finally clicked for him.

"It honestly was my worst stroke," Hall said. "It was this year that I started getting my back to the point where it is. When I look back on how it was a year ago, it's kind of shocking. I didn't think I would honestly be here."

Lakewood continues to grow

A couple seasons ago, Lakewood had to mix boys and girls in exhibition events to compete in relays. That is no longer an issue.

The Lancers have 20 swimmers after having 16 a year ago for coach Krista Weekly, and they are swimming with the best of the best.

Junior Nathaniel Graham placed fourth in the B flight 100 free (53.74) and sixth in the 100 fly (1:01.80) this past Saturday during the Ned Reeb Memorial at Ohio State University. The Ned Reeb has some of the best competition in the state.

The boys also received strong showings from sophomores John Hoffman and Justin Halter. The girls were led by senior Allie Rose, sophomore Elana Preston and freshman Shelby Graham.

Nethers set to swim for Valley

Freshman Alex Nethers, a standout for the Licking County Family YMCA Sharks, will make her varsity debut in January for Licking Valley.

Girls track coach Jess Hoover is doubling as the swim coach, and she hopes Nethers is just the beginning for Valley swimming, which only has had a handful of competitors, including 2010 state qualifier Kayte Postle, during the past decade.

Hoover's daughter is a seventh-grader on the Sharks club team, and three Valley sixth-graders also swim on area club teams.

ksnyder@newarkadvocate.com

740-328-8556

Twitter: @newarkurt

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