

Girls Swimming

Girls swimming and diving season preview spotlight: Harris ready to help Fort Zumwalt West reach next level

- [By Steve Overbey | STLhighschoolsports.com](http://STLhighschoolsports.com)



O'FALLON, Mo. — Courtney Harris needed no instruction.

At age 8, she simply jumped into the water and took off. Much to the surprise of her mother, Suzanne.

A state swimming champion in her day, Suzanne was competing in the 2009 Show-Me Games at Hickman High in Columbia with little Courtney tagging along.

At some point during the day-long event, Courtney wandered over to a nearby kiddie pool and hopped in.

”I was watching all the swimmers and just I wanted to be like them,” said Courtney, who now is a senior at Fort Zumwalt West.

Courtney immediately took to the water. Even though she had never swam before, by the end of the afternoon, she was executing all the strokes with expert-like precision.

“I asked her, ‘How did you that?’ ” Suzanne recalled. “She watched people and just picked up on it.”

That was the start of Courtney’s love affair with water. A journey that has brought her a high school state championship and will take her to the USA Swimming Junior Nationals next week in Federal Way, Washington.

And it all started with a desire to be like mom and her older sister, Amanda, who was also competing at the Show-Me meet, which featured athletes from across the state in all age groups.

“I’ve been working at it almost every day since then,” Courtney said. “It’s an important part of my life.”

It shows Fort Zumwalt West's Courtney Harris ready to lead the Jaguars this season.

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Harris quickly developed into one of the top sprinters in the Midwest. She will attend the University of Houston on a scholarship, choosing the Cougars over a host of other NCAA Division I schools that had been clamoring for her services over the past couple years. Harris was wooed by Washington State, Wyoming, Utah, Nebraska and Florida International before finally choosing Houston in September.

That road began in a side pool while her mother and sister were competing nearby.

“It was something I wanted to do, so I just got in there,” Courtney said. “I liked it and I’ve been in love with it ever since.”

Harris laughs at her surprising beginning. But it was obvious to Suzanne that she had a future champion on her hands.

“Right away, you could just tell the ability was there,” Suzanne said.

Suzanne Miklich won the state 200 individual medley championship as a senior at McCluer High in 1984. She went on to swim at Truman State University in Kirksville, when it was known as Northeast Missouri State.

So she is not your average swimming parent. Suzanne, who recently gave up competing after a successful bout with breast cancer, is well aware of what it takes to reach the next level.

“She’s a lot better than me,” Suzanne admitted.

Courtney is a lot better than most swimmers. She won the 100 freestyle championship at last year’s Class 2 state meet and came in a close second in the 50 free, losing by .004 of a second to Liberty North freshman Ainsley Dillon.

This season, Harris has her eyes set on winning both sprint races at state.

“There’s nothing she can’t do if she puts her mind to it,” Zumwalt West swimming coach Sarah Martin said. “There’s that determination and drive that you can’t teach — it’s just part of her.”

Even Harris’ teammates at West marvel at her strong work ethic.

“Nothing can keep her out of the water,” said West senior Emily Martin, one of Courtney’s best friends. “She works so hard at it. And you can tell swimming makes her happy.”



Fort Zumwalt West's Courtney Harris prepares to launch from the blocks on Tuesday, December 3, 2019 at the Rec Plex in St. Peters, Mo. Paul Halfacre, STLhighschoolsports.com

Paul Halfacre

Harris has always enjoyed the shorter races. Her strength lies in her quick start off the blocks and her smooth strokes that cut through the water like a hot knife through butter. Her personal best long course time of 26.64 in the 50-meters is tantalizingly close to the United States Olympic trials qualifying time of 25.99.

An A-plus student, Harris went through a serious setback less than two months before last year's state meet. She suffered a broken eardrum on Christmas Day that sidelined her for the next four weeks. Even when she wasn't allowed to put her head in the water, she did the kick exercises with her teammates every day in practice.

That type of dedication caught the eye of West sophomore Allison Heaney.

"She just wanted to be around her teammates and show her support," Heaney said. "It meant a lot."

Harris bounced back and tapered just before the state meet. She kept right on rolling with a successful campaign for the Rec-Plex Sharks, her club team based in St. Peters.

Harris has plenty of hobbies outside of swimming, although she estimates she spends anywhere from 12 to 24 hours a week in the water. She likes to draw and is particularly proud of her picture of fictional cartoon character Natsu Dragneel, which sits in a frame on the wall of her basement.

For now, Harris is focused on the Junior Nationals. After that, she will return to the high school level with her eye on double gold at the state meet in February.

“This is going to be the most memorable thing for me because it’s my last time swimming with my entire team,” Harris said. “No matter which way it goes, the most important thing is the time I spend out there with my friends.”