Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Grafton girls shine with sectional show that qualifies 11 individual finishes, 3 relays for state; Port advances 3 divers

Anyone doubting that the Grafton girls' swimming and diving team can hold its own against the state's best should have been at Plymouth High School last weekend.

Besides nearly defeating defending state champion Shorewood in a WIAA Division 2 sectional meet, the Black Hawks ensured themselves of ample representation in this week's state competition.

Grafton scored 353 points, just nine behind first-place Shorewood, in the 13-team sectional field.

In the process, the Hawks had 11 individual performances and all three of their relays qualify for the state meet in Madison.

"We did well. I was kind of hoping for a certain number of qualifiers, and we did better than that," Grafton coach John Douglass said.

"It was a great meet for us. The ultimate goal was not getting points or placing, but getting through as many kids as possible."

To no one's surprise, the Hawks were led by sophomore sensation Sam Senczyszyn, who won the 50-yard freestyle (a team-record 23.59 seconds) and 100 breaststroke (1:04.38).

Grafton also got wins from junior Stephanie Haebig in the 100 backstroke (59.2) and the 200 medley relay of Haebig, Rachel Hauer, Katherine Bordetskaya and Katelyn Brooks (1:51.81).

Event winners qualified for the state meet along with finishers that were among the next 12 best for all sectionals.

The Hawks' other individual state qualifiers were sophomore divers Gabby Kraus (third with 362.25 points) and Paige Schommer (fifth, 331.75); freshman Natalie Keshemberg in the backstroke (second, 59.88) and 100 butterfly (third, 59.68); Haebig in the 200 freestyle (fifth, 1:59.87); sophomore Rachel Hauer in the breaststroke (third, 1:09.31) and 200 individual medley (fourth, 2:14.07); and Bordetskaya, a freshman, in the individual medley (fifth, 2:15.47).

Grafton's other state-bound relays are the 400 freestyle team of Keshemberg, Senczyszyn, Hauer and Haebig (second, a team-record 3:38.34) and 200 freestyle team of Senczyszyn, Keshemberg, Ally Sandoval and Katelyn Brooks (third, 1:42.04).

Port Washington, which finished 10th in the sectional meet with 67 points, had three state qualifiers, all in diving.

The trio includes senior Hayley Seitz (second, 371.4 points), junior Kristen Smith (sixth, 329.35) and freshman Becca Murray (10th, 273.55).

"I'm thrilled to have all three of them get through," Port coach Melissa Hoogester said.

"I had a really good feeling that Hayley and Kristen would make it and was hoping that Becca would, too."

Seitz earned her fourth consecutive trip to the state level, where she placed 14th last year. Smith will return for the second straight year after taking 15th in 2011.

The Grafton and Port divers are coached by Dennis Hubert.

Grafton, which finished a strong second to Shorewood in the Small Schools Invitational on Oct. 13, came within a whisker of winning the rematch Saturday.

The Hawks held a three-point lead entering the last event, the 400 freestyle relay, but had to finish ahead of Shorewood to take the team title.

Although Grafton led most of the race, the Greyhounds pulled away on the final leg. Kristin Malone outreached the Hawks' Haebig by a hand's length at the wall to give Shorewood the win.

"It was a great, tight race. Although it was a little disappointing to not win it, that feeling didn't last long," Douglass said.

"The kids swam their hearts out, and overall it was a fabulous meet for us. With all the kids we have going to state, we couldn't be disappointed with how things went."

Port and Grafton both got off to strong starts in the meet by scoring 37 and 30 points, respectively, in diving. Schommer will return to state after placing 11th there last year, and Kraus qualified for the first time.

The Hawks continued their steady scoring by winning the medley relay by seven 100ths of a second over second-place Whitefish Bay. Third-place Shorewood was only 23 100ths out of first.

"I actually thought we would be second in that event, so it was a great way to start the swimming," Douglass said.

Another key event for Grafton was the individual medley, where it scored 34 points. In addition to significant time drops by Hauer and Bordetskaya, the Hawks got a 12th from freshman Lilly Kaplan (2:31.39).

Senczyszyn dominated the field in both of her individual races, posting the fastest time among all state qualifiers in each event. In last year's state meet, she was second in the breaststroke and fifth in the 50 freestyle.

"Sam wanted to have a great meet, and she did," Douglass said. "I think she's on a mission this year to be a state champion."

Grafton's most impressive two-one punch came in the backstroke, where Haebig and Keshemberg combined to score 37 points in a 25-swimmer field.

"It was a real bonus to take first and second in that event," Douglass said.

The Hawks narrowly missed having three state qualifiers in the breaststroke. In addition to advancing Senczyszyn and Hauer, they got a sixth-place finish from Bordetskaya, whose 1:10.61 time just missed the 1:10.43 cutoff mark.

Grafton's other top-10 sectional finishers were senior Anna Hauer, who placed seventh in the 500 freestyle (5:44.37) and ninth in the 200 freestyle (2:07.11), and Brooks, a senior who was eighth in the 50 freestyle (26.12) and 100 freestyle (57.6).

Douglass expects good things from his team, which will have plenty of big-meet experience. Besides Senczyszyn, the Hawks' returning state qualifiers are Schommer, Haebig, Rachel Hauer and Brooks.

"The reality of this meet is that Shorewood and Milton are the top two teams in Division 2. I expect them to fight for the title," Douglass said.

"I think we will probably be in the fight for third place."

Port had no state qualifiers in swimming, but Hoogester noted that 12 of the Pirates' 13 sectional participants in those races turned in personal-best times.

"I was really thrilled with that," she said.

Port's best swimming finishes came from senior Kelsey Zeman, who was eighth in the 500 freestyle (5:46.34) and 13th in the individual medley (2:31.68).

The Division 2 state meet will be held Friday, Nov. 9, at the University of Wisconsin Natatorium. Diving starts at 2:30 p.m., followed by swimming at 6:30 p.m.

Image Information: SOPHOMORE RACHEL HAUER is one of four Grafton swimmers who qualified for this week's WIAA Division 2 state meet in two individual events. Hauer placed third in the 100-yard breaststroke and fourth in the 200 individual medley at a sectional meet in Plymouth. Photo by Sam Arendt