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Grafton boys ride junior's victory in 50 freestyle to impressive showing at Division 2 state swimming meet

Al Nennig was a young man on a mission last Friday at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Natatorium.

Heading into the WIAA state swimming and diving meet, the junior had his sights set on becoming the first Grafton boy in nearly 20 years to win an individual state championship.

By the time the Division 2 competition ended, Nennig not only accomplished his mission, he came within a whisker of doubling his fun.

Besides winning the 50-yard freestyle, he finished second in the 100 breaststroke, trailing only Jake Mandli of McFarland.

"I felt very comfortable about my chances going in," said Nennig, who had two of five school-record times set by Grafton swimmers at the meet.

"I wanted to have two firsts, but winning one championship out of two isn't too bad."

In the 50 freestyle, Nennig jumped to an early lead and never trailed, posting a winning time of 21.64 seconds. “I was really focused and nailed my start and turn,” he said.

The breaststroke race didn’t go quite as smoothly, as Mandli broke out quickly on the way to a state-record time of 56.43. Nennig stayed close but couldn’t make up the difference in his 58.35 effort.

“I was a little disappointed with my time. I took it out a little too slow in the first 50,” Nennig said. “I knew if (Mandli) got out faster, he would be hard to catch.”

Nennig became the first Grafton boy to win a state swimming title since Eric Mueller, who won the 100 breaststroke in 1992 and 1993.

Nennig’s first-place effort also continued a family tradition of swimming excellence. His sisters Bailey and Sadie won girls’ state titles in the 500 freestyle and 100 backstroke, respectively.

Grafton’s team performance Friday wasn’t too bad, either. Coach Mark Minz’s squad scored in six events and collected 111 points, good for ninth place in the 31-team standings.

McFarland took the team title with 325 points. Cedarburg was second with 249.5 points, followed in the top eight by Monona Grove (237), Madison Edgewood (154.5), Kiel (145), Milton (136), Ashwaubenon (124) and Fort Atkinson (123).

In addition to Nennig’s solo finishes, the Black Hawks had three other top-10 performances: a third from their 200 freestyle relay team of Nennig, Brad Kempka, Kieran Paddock and Ben Gosselin (1:28.68); sixth from diver Zach Greenwood (306.35 points); and eighth from the 400 freestyle team of Kempka, Paddock, Gosselin and Nennig (3:20.46).

Grafton’s other finishes were an 11th by Kempka in the 100 freestyle (49.52) and 16th by diver Killian Mielotz (264.35 points).

All of the Hawks’ swimmers are juniors, and both divers are sophomores.

Port Washington got two points from its lone state qualifier, junior Alex Mehre, who was 15th in the 100 butterfly (57.54).

Each of Grafton’s swimming times set school records, including Nennig’s 21.53 on the lead-off 50-yard leg in the 200 freestyle relay race, which broke the mark he set earlier in the meet.

“They all did a heck of a job,” said Minz, whose team had its highest finish at the state level in at least 10 years.

“Every one of our swimmers had season-best times, so you can’t ask for much more than that.”

Nennig, whose only losses in individual competition this season came against Mandli, continued to provide the Hawks with impressive leadership, Minz said. After finishing second in the

breaststroke and fifth in the 50 freestyle at last year's state meet, Nennig had plenty of motivation, his coach noted.

"It was really fun to see how Al responded to the challenges," Minz said. "He's very competitive, so it wasn't surprising for him to come out and go right at it."

The performances of Grafton's young divers impressed Minz as well.

"Zach has continued to improve and got a medal this time after placing 13th at state last season," he said.

"Killian is in his first full year of diving, so for him to make it to state was quite an accomplishment."

Mehre became the first Port swimmer to qualify for a state meet since 2009 — an achievement not lost on coach Steve Schiessl.

"It was a really nice accomplishment for Alex. He's worked hard and deserved to be there," Schiessl said. "He's only a junior, so he has another chance to come back next season and do even better."

Image Information: JUNIOR AL NENNIG led a strong showing by the Grafton boys' swimming and diving team at the WIAA Division 2 state meet. In addition to winning the 50-yard freestyle, he placed second in the 100 breaststroke (inset photo) and was a member of two top-10 relay teams. Photo by Sam Arendt