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It's happening in Hudson: Raiders on a roll

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You can forgive the greater Wisconsin swim and dive community if the achievements of the Hudson girls team might go unnoticed. After all, Hudson sits right on the Wisconsin-Minnesota border, and the team makes regular forays into Minnesota for dual meets and invitationals.

But come November, Wisconsin swim and dive fans may have to take notice of the Raiders, for Hudson is putting together a very good season. The Hudson squad has strung together a series of impressive performances this season, including what is believed to be the first two invitational wins in the program's history.

"We have made it a goal this year to enjoy being together, be good teammates, and swim as fast as (we) can," said head coach Kelly Hackbarth, in her fourth year leading the Hudson program.

As so often happens with programs on the rise, increased numbers have helped boost the team's performance. Hackbarth counts 36 swimmers and divers on the team this year, up from the 20-25 the team had in past years. In addition, Hackbarth and assistant coach Katie Zappa have focused on increasing daily practice yardage for the team, and set some more ambitious goals for the team.

It's paid off - in early September, the Raiders posted a 5th-place finish at the Eau Claire Memorial Relay Invitational, and weren't that far off the heels of traditional state powers Madison Memorial and West. Then the Raiders grabbed back-to-back invitational wins -- the Husky Invitational at Eau Claire North on Sept. 24, and then the Simley Invitational in Minnesota on Saturday.

Of course, it doesn't hurt to add a couple of very fast freshman to the mix of swimmers, and Hackbarth has a pair in Devin Cicha and Erika Guenther. The pair have set a bunch of school and meet records already - school records for Cicha in the 100, 200 and 500 frees, and Guenther in the 50 free - and the duo have bolstered the Raiders' relays this season. The two freshmen have joined another freshman, Natlie Wood, sophomore Abby Duerst, juniors Trisha Wood and Lindsey Bedford, and seniors Megan Haney and Catie Weese, to give the Raiders unprecedented depth in individual events and relays.

Hackbarth is also quick to credit the team's divers and dive coach Dick Clark for the team's performance. In Amanda Baker, the Hudson squad has a top-tier diver who qualified for the state meet last year. She outdueled River Falls' Sierra Becker, runner-up for the Division 2 state dive title last year, at the Simley Invite to get the Raiders off to a strong start at the meet.

But Hackbarth mainly credits a truly team atmosphere for the improved fortunes of the team this year. It's a group of swimmers and divers that put the team first, ahead of their own performances.

"The great thing about our team is that my girls care about and for each other first and foremost, and then they care for themselves," she said. "They are constantly asking for our team points, if another swimmer got her best time (or) a diver got her best score, and they constantly cheer for each other as well as athletes from the other teams."

Not a bad season so far for a program that hasn't finished higher than 4th place in the last four years at their sectional qualifying meet. As fortune would have it, Hudson hosts one of the six D1 sectional meets this year, and Hackbarth knows her team will be pumped up to make a strong showing in their home pool.

"We are lucky to host sectionals, as well as lucky to have a fantastic pool to practice and hold meets," she said. "We go into invites (and) big meets discussing what we need to do and that we have a good chance at doing well, but we NEVER go in assuming we can win or do really well. The girls know they need to work for it. We hope to continue our success at conference and sectionals, but have not yet discussed a place we would like to be...other than we will go in doing the best we can.

"I am just so thrilled with my team and proud of how well they have done this year."

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