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SPORTS

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PREPS NORDIC SKIING STATE MEET



Photo finishes for state Nordic titles

Ely's Zoe Devine, Eden Prairie's Benon Brattebo win by a hair.

By CHRISTA LAWLER christalawler@startribune.com

EDEN PRAIRIE, MINN. — Ely senior Zoe Devine barely lost her lead going into the final turn of the girls' freestyle pursuit, then surged and edged past Duluth East's Lyella Kraker by barely a blink at the finish line.

Asked if she was sure she had won the high school Nordic skiing state championship on Thursday afternoon, Devine didn't hesitate.

"No," she said. "That's probably the closest race I've had."

That theme carried on to the boys race, where Benon Brattebo of Eden Prairie and Ben Lewis of Minnetonka came flying around the final curve side-by-side, both finishing in 26 minutes, 0.03 seconds — but Brattebo was credited with the victory.

"It got me by a hair," Lewis said. It was actually Brattebo's left toe, according to a photo taken from the finish booth. The boys and girls races both were photo finishes.

The Minnesota State High School League's Nordic skiing state meet finished Thursday on a bright, 45-degree day at Giants Ridge. Skiers raced in the classic pursuit race in the morning, then started the afternoon's freestyle race staggered according to time, with the fastest going first.

Duluth East's boys and girls won team titles. The girls scored 987 points, followed by Stillwater and St. Paul Highland Park. The boys' team boys had 581 points, followed by Wayzata and St. Paul Highland Park. Devine's combined time was 30:08.7 — one 10th of a second faster than Kraker. She led after the classic, but Kraker, who led after the classic, was closer, making for a concentrated start to the freestyle race.

Devine and Kraker were part of a four-skier pack with Hunter Zimmerman and



Ely's Zoe Devine (left) and Eden Prairie's Benon Brattebo (right) in photo finish. Devine won the individual freestyle with a last-second surge, while Brattebo edged Duluth East's Lyella Kraker after beating her to the state title by one-tenth of a second. Both the boys and girls events were photo finishes.

pel of Erik Rives/Zimmerman and Greta Hansen of Math & Science Academy. They hung tight through the race, with Devine, the sixth-place finisher in 2022, setting the pace on the fast and icy course. Hansen finished third.

Kraker came into the meet with the modest goal of besting her 2022-place finish from last year.

"It was a crazy race," she said. "Zoe had a better lunge at the end."

Prior Lake/New Prague junior Tommy Simmonds had a 16-second

lead after the morning classic race. The trio of Brattebo, Lewis and Eden Prairie's Andrew Dvor overtook him at a series of three hills nicknamed "The Triple Threat" early in the freestyle race.

From there, it was a battle among the three. Brattebo and Lewis eventually pulled ahead, and the former relied on the strength of his sprint for a late kick. Dvor finished third.

"I knew if I was coming into the stadium with Lewis, I had a good shot," he said.



Photo by ALEX EDWARDS/Star Tribune

GIRLS HOCKEY CLASS 1A



Packers forward Alida Ahern's second, third-period goal vs. Simley goalie Sydney Riss proved to be the game-winner.

South St. Paul upsets Simley to reach 17th state tourney

By DAVID LA VAGUE davidlavague@startribune.com

Six weeks after the final goal of the regular season, South St. Paul sophomore forward Alida Ahern spent the better part of the past three weeks missing empty nets, hitting the post or hitting the crossbar.

She hit the jackpot Thursday, scoring twice in a game for the first time all season. Ahern's goals tied the game and put her Packers ahead to start in a 4-1 upset of Simley in the Class 1A, Section 4 girls' hockey championship game.

The top-seeded Spartans took the ice at their home rink, Veterans Memorial Arena in Inver Grove Heights, with two victories against the Packers in as many meetings this season. It didn't matter.

"They beat us by two and three goals, so they knew they could do it," said Ahern, a transfer from Crediton High. "We knew we could do it if we played as a team and stuck to it. We wanted to get to state for the 17th time, and we didn't want them to take it away from us on their home ice."

Simley (21-5-3) grabbed a 1-0 lead at 2 minutes, 36 seconds of the second period on a goal from Mackaylin McGowan. The Spartans entered the third period with that slim lead and 17 minutes from their first Class 1A state tournament appearance.

They were shorthanded to start the game. Leading scorer Ella Tuccitto (17 goals) was forced to sit out a second consecutive playoff game. Simley coach Tom Patrosko called it "an unfortunate

situation" but did not comment further. Things got worse for Simley in the final period. The Spartans took two penalties, and No. 2 seed South St. Paul (25-1) made sure to not waste the opportunity.

Ahern scored early in the second, but it took her team ahead 2-1. She has eight goals this season.

"You don't get many 5-on-3 chances, so you've got to make the most of it," South St. Paul coach Dave Palmquist said. "The danger is you don't score. But they went out and buried that one, and that was huge!" South St. Paul outshot Simley 33-16 for the game.

"They are a hardworking team," Patrosko said. "And we ran out of gas a little bit."

GIRLS HOCKEY CLASS 2A

No. 4 Gentry Academy beats No. 2 Hill-Murray

By HEATHER RILEY heatherriley@startribune.com

Gentry Academy senior Cara Sajevic came out of the penalty box with a breakthrough in the second period and did something that surprised even her coach.

"She shot it cross-center up on the blocker side, which I didn't expect," said Billy Hengen, in his first season leading the Stars. "She's a righty. I thought she was going to go upper glove."

That breakthrough goal for Sajevic put second seed Gentry Academy, ranked No. 4 in Class 2A in the latest coaches' poll, up by two goals on the way to a 4-1 upset victory over top seed Hill-Murray on Thursday in the Class 2A, Section 4 girls' hockey final at Aldrich Arena.

"I got a great pass from Hill-Anna Gazdella," Sajevic said. "And then I thought that the D was going to catch me, but I moved my feet really fast, and I just shot upper left."

Sajevic scored another goal 15 seconds later after an offensive-zone draw to increase the lead to 2-0. She also had an assist and has 12 goals and 70 points this season as

one of the top scorers in Class 2A. The Gentry Academy roster includes a dozen seniors, and Hill-Murray is young. That made age and size factors in the game, Hengen said.

"We have to be the aggressors because we have to put doubt in their minds early," he said, referring to the team's pregame talk. "They're a super-talented group, but I think we're bigger than them."

The Stars (28-2-0) return to the state tournament for a third consecutive season.

For the Packers (23-4-1), ranked No. 2 in Class 2A, it was the second consecutive season of section-final heartbreak against the Stars, who defeated them in last year's title game in double overtime.

Hill-Murray senior Shea Stimmert scored late in the game Thursday to make it 4-1. Packers coach Shawn Reid gave the edge in the game to the Stars, who came out hard on the puck and quick in transition.

"I've just disrupted everything," Reid said. "I think we were a little more tentative than what we've used to. We usually play with a lot of speed, but tonight they suffocated us."



Hill-Murray's Sophie Olson (10) sent the puck to the front of the net in the first period, but the Packers didn't score until late in the game.