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SPOTLIGHT JUNIOR OLYMPIC NATIONAL NORDIC SKI MEET

Many of the state's top Nordic skiers will be testing their skills at the National Junior Olympic meet at Theodore Wirth Park.



Q&A
EVAN GRIFFITH
EDEN PRAIRIE

Section meet was a time to remember

Swimming section meets are all about shaving seconds off the clock. If a swimmer can trim even a fraction of a second in an event, it can make all the difference.

Eden Prairie senior Evan Griffith went well beyond a fractional trim. He won the 500-yard freestyle at the Section 6, 2A meet Saturday in a time of 4 minutes, 44.89 seconds. His seed time going into the event was 4:57.70, or about 9 seconds slower than his final result.

The co-captain and varsity swimmer since the seventh grade will also swim in the 200 freestyle at the upcoming state meet, he qualified with a time of 1:45.07.

Q You took about 9 seconds off your seed time for the 500 freestyle in the 2A meet. What prepped you to the first-place finish?

A I don't know. I kind of just felt good that day. I was trying on a different suit seeing if that was going to help me at all. [During the race] everybody just started falling back. I kind of just kicked it in at the end. I was just feeling good. It just felt great.

Q What was going through your mind just before you entered the water for that race?

A It's really weird, but I kind of just try to clear my head. I just try to take it one step at a time. I decide if I want to give somebody, or stay with them. I was just thinking about my start, then I just tried to keep pace.

Q How did you feel after seeing your time on the board and realizing you finished first?

A I just felt great. I was so happy. That was probably the third race I've won this season. It just felt so good. My last section meet ever, to finish it out with a win. I just couldn't stop smiling. I was so happy.

Q What are you doing this week to prepare for state?

A I'm making sure that I get my rest. I'm eating healthy. Not doing any strenuous activities — no shoveling or anything. Try to relax and try to not worry about anything too much.

Q What are three things you can't live without before a meet?

A I have to have noodles from Noodles and Co. [Laughs], lemon-lime Gatorade, and I have to see my iPod and some good music too, to kind of pump me up with.

Q What do you like better about the longer meet than shorter ones?

A I like the state meet. I have kind of a catch-up stroke. I hold one of my arms out longer than the other. I can sprint well, but I can definitely hold my pace a lot longer than other people.

Q What is one big misconception that folks have about swimmers?

A One thing that bugs me is that you think that if you buy one of the fast skins suits, you will automatically go fast. It's one of the hardest sports to train for. People think swimming is an easy sport, but really you're trying your hardest.

Q Do you have any superstitions or rituals?

A This is kind of weird, but I definitely have to be comfortable when I go to the meet. I like to be warm too, so I normally wear three layers or so, even in the pool area.

Q What kinds of changes do you make to your lifestyle and diet during taper?

A I definitely eat a lot more carbs. I'd say, I definitely cut back on the amount of sweets. The last year I tried to cut down more than usual, but during taper I usually don't eat anything unhealthy. I think a lot of milk too.

HEATHER KELLE



Barnville's Sharmila Ahmed won this year's state high school girls' Nordic ski title and will be competing in the Junior Olympics, which start Sunday at Wirth Park.

Pushing the limits

By ANDREW BAKER • Andrew.Baker@startribune.com

Kyle Bratrud knows that if he is accepted at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, his physical and mental toughness will be tested. That shouldn't be much of an issue for the Eden Prairie senior, who said he rollerskis before school during the cross-country season so he can run with his teammates during the afternoon. Bratrud, who is coming off a fifth-place individual pursuit finish at the boys Nordic ski racing state meet Feb. 17, said he relishes the natural high he gets from pushing his body to the limit — which should also bode well for him at the Junior Olympic National Nordic ski racing meet next week at Theodore Wirth Park in Minneapolis.

"The feeling coming back from a run or a long ski, you can't replace that," said Bratrud, who finished 13th at last fall's Class 2A state cross-country meet. "It's really taught me a lot about doing what's best for me, what's best for my body."

The Junior Olympics, which begin Sunday and last six days, function as a national championship for skiers ages 12-20.

During the season, elite skiers such as Bratrud must compete at more-designated state Junior Olympic qualifiers if they want a shot at the event, in which most U.S. Olympic Nordic skiers have competed.

The national field is divided into 10 regional teams, with each team sending male and female competitors from three age groups: J2 (ages 15-20), J1 (ages 12-14) and J3 (ages 12-14). Bratrud, who said he would be honored to serve in the military and is also considering running and skiing for Iowa State, will share the home-course advantage this year with his Midwest region teammates, including Barnville senior Sharmila Ahmed, this year's girls' Nordic skiing individual state champion.

"It was really exciting and it's something that I've been thinking about and wanting for a long



Ben Saxton hopes to ski as well at the Junior Olympics as he did in claiming the state boys' individual title.

time," Ahmed said of winning state. However, she said, "These nationals are really what we train for all year so it's a totally different ballgame. ... Now there will be a lot more competition and we're really, really excited to have them here in Minneapolis."

Ahmed suffered a torn ligament in her knee last season, keeping her out of both the state meet and the Junior Olympics. Though she has been battling soreness in her shin, it doesn't seem to have slowed her down much and she said her knee has fully recovered.

"After I took a bunch of time [off] I thought about trying to make it in and get on [last year's] J2 team but I think it was a good decision that I didn't. ... I'm glad that I just took it easy and recovered well, and then this summer I got back into training again," Ahmed said.

This will be the third Junior Olympics for Ahmed, who said she has grown close with several of her teammates, including Sarah Bratton of Hopkins and Lia Peterson of Forest Lake.

At state this year, Bratton and Peterson finished third and fourth, respectively, behind Ahmed.

"I've been to state five times and it was just a



Lia Peterson

great way to top off my senior year," Peterson said. "I was a little bummed in the classic race, but it turned out pretty good so I was happy with it overall."

"Classic" refers to one of two disciplines of Nordic skiing, the other being freestyle. In the former, skiers race in pre-laid tracks on the snow, while in the latter there are no tracks.

At the Junior Olympics, there are four events: a freestyle sprint, a distance classic, a distance freestyle and a classic relay. Athletes typically compete in all four.

Lakerville North junior Ben Saxton, who was this year's boys' individual state champion, will be competing at Theodore Wirth alongside several of his teammates from the Minnesota Valley club team.

"I think it's a lot more of a team sport than people think," Saxton said of Nordic skiing, later adding, "I think this year, Midwest has a really stacked squad, and it's our home turf so I'd love to see us move up from our traditional placing, which is usually third to fifth."

Andrew Baker is a University of Minnesota student reporter on assignment for the Star Tribune.