

Youth are present, future for GHS swimming program

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by RICK MAUCH

Olympic gold medalist Dana Vollmer, a senior, is chasing state and national records for the Granbury Lady Pirate swim team. But the future of the program rests with its youth. For example, joining Vollmer on the 200 freestyle relay at the UIL State Meet in Austin next Friday and Saturday are sophomore Carrie Greene and freshmen Seabre Pope and Xela Steenberge.

Greene is going to state for a second consecutive season, having competed on the 400 freestyle relay last season, so coach Robert Laura considers her a veteran now. But Pope and Steenberge are making their maiden voyage to the pinnacle of high school swimming.

"Everybody concentrates on Dana, but those three are the ones that are going to make a difference in our future after she's gone," Laura said. "Three of the four on that relay are going to be back and all three are going to be much better. "This year we knew we had Dana and Carrie who were going to score points consistently for us, but who was going to step up for the other half of the relay?"

Greene, in fact, moved into select company this season. She joined Georgia Steenberge and Ann Wilcox as the only female swimmers to advance to more than one state meet.

Steenberge went all four years she swam for GHS and Wilcox reached Austin twice. Greene, Pope and Xela Steenberge (Georgia's younger sister) have opportunities to tie Georgia's mark.

"It won't seem real until we're there in the blocks," Pope said of advancing to state. "This is really great."

The quartet finished second at the Region II Meet at Loos Natatorium in Dallas, swimming a best time of 1:40.47. Greene thinks that time will get better in Austin and a state championship isn't out of the question.

"Definitely. At least top three," Greene said. "I think we all have faster times in us."

Vollmer will try to set state and national records in the 100 butterfly and 200 free, the event in which she finished sixth in last summer's Olympics. But she's certainly glad to not be going to Austin alone and had high praise for her young teammates on the relay.

"They all just seem to get better each time they get in the water," Vollmer said. "Their times just seem to keep getting lower."

Xela Steenberge joined Greene in saying she thinks the best is yet to come.

"Most definitely. We had our best times (at regionals) and we'll do even better," Steenberge said. "We're all swimming really good."

Clearly, Vollmer is the X factor on the relay. And while he won't have another Olympian to replace her when she's gone, he will have a host of talent from which to choose, making him believe the relay will still be fast next season.

"We had other girls who gave those two freshmen (Pope and Steenberge) a run for their money this season," Laura said. "They (Pope and Steenberge) stepped up when it counted most, but there are plenty of others who can fill out that relay next season."

In all, the Lady Pirates return six regional competitors, while the Pirates bring back all seven who advanced from district. "Everybody's back who scored points at district except Dana," Laura said. "That means not only are our girls going to be strong again, but the boys should be a lot better having had that experience."

"Best of all, next year we know we have three leaders (on the girls team). In fact, we know we have three leaders for the next couple of years and two of them are around for another year after that. That's a pretty good thing to know."

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