

Staab hopes to make big waves at NCAA Championships

*By Keith Peters, March 23, 2011
Palo Alto Online Sports*

Austin Staab has carved out his niche in Stanford men's swimming history as the current holder of more school records (five) than anyone. The senior has won an NCAA title in the 100 fly and has helped the Cardinal keep its historic streak of 30 consecutive Pac-10 meet championships alive for at least another year.

Something, however, is missing from his impressive resume -- an NCAA team title.

Stanford hasn't won a national title in men's swimming since 1998. It was the seventh NCAA crown for head coach Skip Kenney and the eighth overall in program history.

"I'd love not to have '98 as my last memory," said Ted Knapp, Stanford's associate head coach who was Kenney's assistant on the 1985 NCAA title-winning team and the six others since then.

Staab would like to help that 12-year drought.

"I've got my individual title," said the 6-foot-6, 220-pound Staab. "I've had my glory. I've got to get the coaches theirs."

While it will take every Stanford swimmer and diver contributing, Staab may be the key individual this week as the Cardinal goes after its ninth national crown at the NCAA Championships that begin Thursday in Minneapolis, Minn.

Staab is the No. 1 seed in the 200-yard IM after setting a school record of 1:42.01 at the Pac-10 Championships two weeks ago. He's also the No. 1 seed in the 100 fly (44.66), where he won his only individual NCAA title in 2009 with the current school record of 44.18.

Staab is seeded No. 5 in the 100 free (42.32), an event where he ranks No. 2 in school history (42.06). He'll also swim on the No. 2-seeded 400 free relay, which set a school record of 2:48.51 at Pac-10s, in addition to swimming legs on the No. 4-seeded 200 free and 400 medley relay teams.

Stanford last won a relay at the NAAs in 2005. When the Cardinal won the national title in 1998, it captured three relay crowns.

While Stanford was ranked No. 1 in the nation during the dual-meet season, the Cardinal is not favored at NAAs. That, Staab says, does not rule out the possibility of winning.

"It's definitely a consideration," he said. "There's maybe 50 points between the top three (Texas, Cal and Stanford). There's a lot that could happen to make that 50-point margin smaller. Diving will help and we didn't rest as much for Pac-10s. A couple of guys could get hot and move up in the finals.

"It's going to be a good meet. I'm very anxious."

This will be Staab's third NCAA meet instead of fourth. He missed last year's Pac-10s and NAAs after taking a leave of absence from school for personal reasons and family matters. No official reason ever surfaced as Staab's family asked for privacy on the matter.

It's still not a matter of discussion for Staab, who went home at midseason to Westerville, Ohio.

"We knew he was training," said Kenney, "but not who he was training with or how. We just didn't have any contact."

"I just needed some time off," Staab said.

But a week before Stanford finished fourth at the 2010 NCAA Championships, Staab was competing at a sectional championship meet in Buffalo for Westerville Aquatics -- shattering six meet and pool records. He swam a few races and times that were better than he ever achieved before, like a 1:43.55 in the 200-yard fly.

"I was training with my club team," Staab said. "To be honest, I was pretty lazy."

Staab didn't compete in any of last summer's big meets like the national championships, which offered berths in this summer's FINA World Championships.

"It was definitely a good break," Staab said of his summer. "I relaxed, took it easy."

When Staab returned to Stanford in the fall, however, "I was definitely behind," he said of his training. "Skip saw that and took it easy on me."

Staab quickly got back into shape and helped the Cardinal compile a 7-0 meet season that was capped with a 124.5 to 118.5 victory at rival Cal. Staab won his first collegiate 200 IM that day in 1:47.18. A few weeks later at Pac-10s, Staab swam his second 200 IM in 1:42.01 for the Stanford school record. And he wasn't even shaved and tapered for the race.

Staab wasn't informed that he was swimming that race until the day before. Kenney pulled him from the 50 free, which was wide open.

"In the 50 free I could have been anywhere from third to sixth," Staab said. "I think the 200 IM was the best choice, and it turned out to be the best individual choice, as well."

Staab said his training -- daily fly and free work plus using the underwater dolphin kick -- really prepared him for the IM.

Staab will be challenged in the 200 IM by Michigan freshman Kyle Whitaker (1:43.23) and in the 100 fly by Cal sophomore Thomas Shields (44.78).

While Stanford loses 114 individual points through graduation and injury -- injured senior David Mosko scored 36 points last season -- the addition of Staab and the improvement of his teammates should overcome that loss.

Stanford, for example, scored no points in the 200 IM last year. A victory by Staab would be 20 points. Graduated senior Eugene Godsoe was third in the 100 fly (16 points), where another Staab win would be an extra four points. Godsoe, however, did win the 100 back in 2010 and Stanford has no one in the top 10 this week.

Stanford will need senior diver Brent Eichenseer to score some points and will have to score in events where it did not last year, like in the 400 IM.

The Cardinal also could use a repeat performance in the 1,650 free from junior Chad La Tourette, who last year became the team's first 1,650 champ in 23 years.

In addition to La Tourette and Staab, sophomore Matthew Swanston ranks No. 4 in the 200 back (1:41.47), senior John Criste ranks No. 8 in the 200 breast (1:54.61), junior Bobby Bollier is No. 8 in the 500 free (4:16.72) and sophomore Aaron Wayne is No. 9 in the 50 free (19.51). Stanford has 14 swimmers ranked in the top-10 across the 13 events.

La Tourette knows the NCAA title drought has been nagging at Stanford swimmers for years and perhaps it's time to change that.

"We have the personnel," he said.

LaTourette comes in ranked No. 2 in the mile and plans on swimming for points in the 500 free and perhaps the 400 IM on the final day -- giving him something to do each day.

"I think I'm due for big drops in that (400 IM) event," he said. "We're looking for every point we can get."

"I'd like to repeat my title but, if I had my choice, I'd want to win the team title and throw the coaches in the pool. That would be great."