

NEWARK POST

Sports

Winter swim season just the beginning for Newark swimmer

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Published: Thursday, February 18, 2010 10:39 AM CST

Being a member of a high school swim team requires a commitment perhaps greater than in any other sport. Practices consist of swimming back and forth ... lap after lap... day after day. By yourself, in a pool, and often in the dead of winter.

But for Rachel Ward, a sophomore on the Newark High swim team, the pool is a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of her everyday life, no matter what time of year it is, and no matter the team.



Rachel Ward (left) and her Special Olympics coach (on deck), Kit Iffland, at the 2009 Special Olympics Delaware Summer Games, held at the University of Delaware outdoor pool.

"I love winning meets and improving my times," Ward said when asked her favorite part of the swim season.

Dropping times and setting personal bests in the 100 butterfly, 50 free and 100 backstroke have become routine during Ward's second season on the Newark team. And like any competitive swimmer, the success in the pool during competition, which is measured in minutes and seconds, is a direct result of time spent in the water between meets, measured in hours.

"Rachel continues to be a hard worker at practices," Newark coach Bryan Stambaugh says. "She puts a lot of effort in to make herself better, and clearly it has paid off."

Newark's volunteer stroke coach, MJ Polaski, who was the girls' head coach when Ward joined the team as a freshman, reiterates that without her dedication and hard work in the pool during each practice session — the Yellowjackets swim between two and 2½ miles each practice — Ward could have never dropped time in the meets. Nor would she have been able to win her first event ever at the high school level back in December against Appoquinimink.

"The highlight of my season this year was when Rachel won her first event," Polaski said of Ward's win in the 200 free, which was then followed by a first-place finish in the 500 free against Pencader Charter. "She always wants to do her part for the team, and although she has earned points for the team before by placing, it was so nice to see her come in first."

While the high school meet season begins to wind down and most of her teammates look forward to a break from the pool, Ward will dive right back in to her next swim season, as a member of the Grizzly Bears Special Olympics team. She will be training for the 2010 Special Olympics Delaware Summer Games in June and the 2010 Special Olympics National Games, held in mid-July in Lincoln, Neb.

"Rachel is a leader on our team," says Grizzly Bears coach Kit Iffland, who encouraged Ward to join the

Yellowjackets and says her achievements have inspired her teammates to set goals to swim on their high school teams. "She gladly demonstrates various swimming techniques during stroke practice to provide a more visual example, allowing some of the other swimmers an enhanced way to learn more difficult swimming skills. She continually added an increasing number of practice nights to her schedule, as swimming became more of a passion and her goals widened."

Ward's success in the pool has helped her blossom away from it, where her mother has seen a dramatic change in her daughter, both socially and academically, especially since joining the Newark High team.

"Since Rachel has been on the high school team, I have noticed her confidence blossom," a proud Claudine Vazquez says. "She has won student of the marking period several times, and before joining the team she was an extreme introvert, but now is friends with many of her teammates and is very proud to wear her Newark gear."

"I love meeting new people and making new friends," Ward says of the social benefits of competing on both teams.

Stambaugh added Ward's teammates enjoy having her on the team and are very supportive of her; and they enjoy her contagious smile and "just do it" attitude, no matter the circumstances.

And it's that attitude that makes Ward's commitment to the sport of swimming special. Lap after lap ... day after day ... season after season.

NEWS AND NOTES: News and Notes: St. Mark's middle linebacker and offensive lineman Chaz Malewski was named co-recipient of the annual Michael DeLucia Memorial Sportsmanship Award. The award is presented annually to a Catholic school senior football player or players who show outstanding effort on the field, attitude, character and sportsmanship. ... The Delaware Sportswriters and Broadcasters Assoc. annual banquet is Thursday, March 25, at Cavaliers Country Club. Reception starts at 5:30 with dinner at 6:30. Toastmaster is Eagles announcer Merrill Reese. To purchase tickets visit www.delsports.org. ... Send sports stories to jonbuzby@hotmail.com.

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