

Perfect

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“Going into it, I think I was the only one who had a clue about seeding or any number things,” Antonuk said. “I kind of came over to the team, and I’m like, ‘Hey, you guys, we kind of just gotta hold it. What we’ve got to do is we’ve got to go out there and perform.’ That’s what we did.”

“When Zacha finished and Marcus was coming in, I kind of started to think to myself, ‘You know, I’m not the last one. I’m not going to finish this race, but I’m sure as hell am going to make sure that the finish of this race is a good one.’”

The Hodags found themselves in the top five the whole way. The foursome was in fifth following King’s opening leg. Marcus O’Malley, swimming his first and only event of the night, followed that by solidifying the team in fourth through 200 yards. Antonuk put the Hodags in a virtual dead-heat for third entering the final leg and though Fugle was out-touched by 0.04 seconds for third, he came to the wall 1.89 seconds ahead of a fast-closing Plymouth squad.

As it turned out, the Hodags could have finished sixth and still won, as McFarland led wire-to-wire to upset top-seeded Shorewood in the event.

Either way, the moment was the realization of goal set one year prior when the Hodags, with an underclassmen-laden team, finished third at state.

“This was a huge group effort,” Marcus O’Malley said. “No person on this team swam selfishly, swam for themselves. Everyone trained for each other. Jack keeps talking about how he did it for the team. Other people are talking about how they do it for the team. Every single person here wanted the first-place trophy and we got it as a team. It doesn’t matter what happened individually. We needed everybody and we used everybody.”

The Hodags fell behind Shorewood 176-131 following the 500-yard freestyle — the only race Rhinelander did not have at least one participant. The team started to make up the gap by earning its 24th individual state title, winning the 200 freestyle relay. The team of Carter Gaber, Daniel Gillingham, Fugle and Charlie Heck hit the wall in a school-record time of 1:27.00 — beating the record of 1:27.76 set when the team won the event at state in 2019 and, more importantly, holding off Shorewood by 0.45 seconds for the win.

“We’ve been crushing that event from the beginning of the season,” Gaber said. “I feel like we were seeded first so, to everyone else, it seemed like there was more pressure, but we were so confident going into that, we kind of knew it was going to happen. We threw down some great times. We took second last year and we all knew it was kind of a weak relay and we could really drop some time in that.”

Rhinelander trailed by 0.17 seconds entering the final 50 yards of the relay but Charlie Heck posted a 21.30-second final leg to catch and pass Shorewood’s Johan Bannink — setting off a string of exuberant fist pumps and screams in the water from the senior as he completed his final high school race.

“Hitting the touch pad at the end and seeing the No. 1 on the board, it was just a dream come true,” he said. “It was amazing. I was just so happy that I could bring home what my teammates started in that relay, be the first to touch that wall. It was an amazing feeling.”

The rally continued in the 100-yard backstroke where King backed up his roughly 3 1/2 second-time drop from sectionals and shaved off another 0.86 seconds to finish second overall behind top-seeded Lyon Hall of McFarland.

STATE CHAMPIONSHIP IN PHOTOS

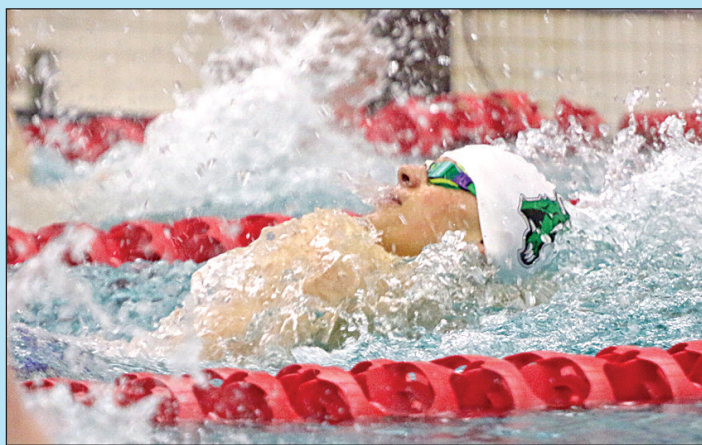
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Rhinelander’s Charlie Heck reacts after winning the 200-yard freestyle relay during the WIAA Division 2 state championship meet in Waukesha Friday, Feb. 17.



Rhinelander’s Daniel Gillingham swims the backstroke leg of the 200-yard individual medley during the WIAA Division 2 state championship meet in Waukesha Friday, Feb. 17. Gillingham finished fourth in the event with the school-record time of 1 minute, 58.09 seconds.



Rhinelander’s Zacha King heads to the wall in the 100-yard backstroke during the WIAA Division 2 state championship meet in Waukesha Friday, Feb. 17. King finished second in the event.



Rhinelander’s Jack Antonuk celebrates on the podium with teammates Mathias Fugle, Zacha King and Marcus O’Malley after the Hodags finished fourth in the 400-yard freestyle relay at the WIAA Division 2 state meet in Waukesha Friday, Feb. 17.



ABOVE: Rhinelander’s Jack Antonuk competes in the 100-yard breaststroke during the WIAA Division 2 state championship meet in Waukesha Friday, Feb. 17. Antonuk set a school record in the event with a time of 59.94 seconds.

RIGHT: Rhinelander High School boys’ swim coach Jenny Heck reacts after receiving the WIAA D2 state championship trophy in Waukesha Friday, Feb. 17.



Gaber added an eighth-place finish in the event (55.25) and sophomore Dolan O’Malley was 13th (56.55) as the Hodags narrowed the gap to 10 points to Shorewood with two events remaining.

The Greyhounds opened the door in the 100 breaststroke as 11th-seeded Noah Mulvey struggled and finished 15th. Meanwhile, Antonuk broke his own school record in the event, becoming the first Hodag to eclipse the one-minute mark (59.94).

“I got the personal goal, but my personal goal wasn’t really what mattered. What mattered was the big goal for the team,” he said.

Rhinelander opened the night with a school record and a runner-up performance in the 200 medley relay as the all-senior team of Gaber, Antonuk, Gillingham and Heck finished second with a 1:36.44, 0.55 seconds behind McFarland.

Gillingham finished on the podium in all four of his events for a second straight year. He took fourth in the 200 individual medley with a school-record time of 1:58.09 and added a sixth-place finish in the 100 butterfly (52.86).

“I was really excited to see what I could do,” he said. “My average was a little higher and I was pleased with that. I dropped some time, not as much as I wanted to, but all that

matters is I put points toward the total amount that our team got and it ended up being enough to get us the state (championship).”

Gillingham broke a school record that was only minutes old in the IM. King, swimming out of the slower of the two heats, dropped more than 4 1/2 seconds in the event to win the heat and take fifth overall (1:58.58), beating the mark of 1:58.73 set by Nolan Francis in 2019.

“Zacha was amazing,” Jenny Heck said. “I said halfway through the season, ‘Zacha, you’re going to be our secret weapon.’ I kept telling him that and he trained like a maniac and he gave it his all. People didn’t expect this out of him. If it wasn’t for that, and people doing all those little things, it had to all come together.”

Nine of Rhinelander’s 10 swimmers qualified for the state meet in either an individual event or a relay. Charlie Heck won the opening heat in both the 50 (21.84) and the 100 freestyle (48.55), taking eighth in both of those events. Antonuk added an eighth-place finish in the 200 IM (2:01.99) and Gaber was 12th in the 50 freestyle (22.33).

Fugle was 11th in both the 200 freestyle (1:49.86) and in the 100 freestyle (48.87). Denis (2:05.29) and Dolan O’Malley (2:05.64) were 14th

and 15th, respectively, in the 200 IM.

Rhinelander was projected to score 252 points in the meet and outperformed those projections by four. Even though the Hodags fell behind in the first two-thirds of the meet, they never strayed far from how they were projected to fare, based on their qualifying performances at sectionals.

“We knew where we stood but you don’t know how other people will do,” coach Heck said. “You can only control what you can do. That was our motto. We can only control what we could do all along — all season, all year. That’s what we did and we’re best when we just stick with a plan, and that’s what we did. They didn’t let it get in their head if something didn’t go right. They kept it together and they did what they needed to do.”

The end result was nothing short of historic.

“There’s no one that deserves it more than these guys,” Charlie Heck said. “They work harder than anyone I’ve ever met. I thought I worked hard my freshman year but, every year, we’ve just been working harder and harder. Truthfully, this was the perfect ending.”

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