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Section B • November 16, 2022



River Falls State Swim and Dive competitors (from left) junior Rachel Everson, senior Ellery Ottem, senior Kayleigh Volkman, and freshman Avery Singel celebrate competing at State at the Waukesha South High School on Saturday, Nov. 12. Photo courtesy of River Falls Swim and Dive



River Falls senior swimmer Ellery Ottem stands on the podium with her fourth-place medal after competing in the 200-Yard Freestyle event at the 2022 State Swimming Championship at Waukesha South High School on Saturday, Nov. 12. Ottem also earned a fifth-place finish in the 100-yard Freestyle event. Photo courtesy of River Falls Swim and Dive

River Falls' Ellery Ottem earns two top-five finishes at State Swimming Championship

All three divers finish top 22

By Reagan Hoverman

The River Falls High School swimming record board needs to be updated one last time.

Wildcat senior swimmer Ellery Ottem notched two top-five finishes, which included two re-broken school records, and all of the divers finished in the top 22 at the 2022 Girls Swimming and Diving Championship at Waukesha South High School on Saturday, Nov. 12.

For Ottem, the final results of the state championship meet at Waukesha were a bit-

tersweet moment. Throughout the 2022 senior campaign, her primary goal was to earn two top-three finishes at the state meet. Instead, she earned a fourth-place finish in the 200-yard Freestyle and a fifth-place finish in the 100-yard Freestyle.

Although it wasn't the final leaderboard result Ottem wanted, she was more than happy with how she swam, especially with the times she posted which re-broke the previous school records she held in those two events. River Falls head coach Caitlin Brudzinski spoke about Ottem's results.

"At this point, there are such strong ath-

letes, you can only control what you can do," Brudzinski said. "While she had a good day, so did everybody else. The top four finishers were all within 0.7 seconds and they were all really close. I know she wanted to finish higher, but she dropped time and re-broke the records from last weekend, she was feeling good."

Although Ottem finished fourth in the 200-yard Freestyle event, she was within 0.7 seconds of winning the state championship. The margin between the top four finishers was all well within one second and at one point was so close that Brudzinski and the crowd strug-

gled to tell who was leading a race that turned into a photo finish.

"Watching the four of them go into that final stretch (of the 200-yard) was so close," Brudzinski said. "When they finished everyone looked up at the board because nobody could tell (the results) just from looking in the water. She had a good day, unfortunately so did everybody else."

While Ottem competed in the Swimming Championship events, River Falls had three athletes competing in the State Diving Championship. All divers who qualified for state

See STATE SWIM Page B-2



Prescott senior Ava Salay was all smiles shortly after inking her letter of intent to join the Wisconsin Badgers Women's Golf program on National Signing Day on Wednesday, Nov. 9, at Prescott High School. Photo by Reagan Hoverman



Prescott's Ava Salay, flanked by her father and head coach Chad Salay, hits a wedge from the middle of the fairway during the 2022 Girls Golf State Championship at University Ridge Golf Course in Madison. Photo by Reagan Hoverman



River Falls senior pitcher Keenan Mork celebrates National Signing Day with his parents at River Falls High School on Wednesday, Nov. 9, where he made it official that he will continue his athletic and academic career at Notre Dame, a Division 1 ACC baseball program. Photo by Reagan Hoverman



River Falls senior pitcher Keenan Mork delivers a strike during the WIAA Division 1 Regional Championship game on the road against Eau Claire Memorial on Thursday, June 2, at historic Carson Park in Eau Claire. Photo by Reagan Hoverman

Prescott's Ava Salay makes it official with the Wisconsin Badgers

By Reagan Hoverman

While the illustrious high school career of Prescott senior Ava Salay has ended, she will continue her athletic and academic journey at the University of Wisconsin next year as a member of the women's golf program.

Salay cemented her commitment to collegiate golf at the National Signing Day event on Wednesday, Nov. 9, at Prescott High School. Salay continues her career as a Division 1 player with the Badgers in Madison as the only in-state recruit for the program this season.

Salay had always dreamt of becoming a

Wisconsin Badger. She made that dream a reality on national signing day surrounded by family, friends and the coaching staff that helped her become a three-time state champion and a Division 1 caliber golfer. She spoke about making it official with Wisconsin.

"I'm really excited to go to Wisconsin. It's always been a dream of mine since I was young," Salay said on National Signing Day. "It's always been in the back of my mind and then when recruiting started it became real. It started being like, 'I could actually do this and become a Badger.' That's just what I had my heart set on."

See SALAY, Page B-4

RF's Keenan Mork to play baseball at Notre Dame

By Reagan Hoverman

River Falls High School senior pitcher Keenan Mork has all of the physical attributes of a future Division 1 college player, but it's his mentality that pushed him over the top and made him a Notre Dame Fighting Irish commit.

Mork and six other River Falls seniors signed their respective letters of intent at the high school on National Signing Day on Wednesday, Nov. 9, while surrounded by family, friends and coaches.

For River Falls baseball head coach Ryan Bishop, Wednesday was a special day because it's not often a high school baseball coach has a player sign a letter of intent to

play Division 1 baseball, and it's even rarer that the player commits to compete at a school in a Power Five conference.

"Anytime you're getting an opportunity to play after high school, you're doing something well," Bishop said of Mork. "The fact that he is getting an opportunity to play at the Division 1 level at an ACC school like Notre Dame, that's really impressive. I'm super proud of him and the development he's made."

For Mork, getting the opportunity to play at a historically prestigious institution in a Power Five conference is a dream come true. He spoke about Notre Dame, Division 1 baseball and the recruiting process.

See MORK, Page B-4



River Falls senior Ella Peters slashes through the lane before making a layup during the scrimmage against Prescott on Friday, Nov. 11, in River Falls. Peters and the rest of the starters from last season return to the Wildcats' roster this year. Photo by Reagan Hoverman



Prescott junior forward Lila Posthuma shoots a free throw during the Cardinals' scrimmage against Hudson in River Falls on Friday, Nov. 11. Posthuma got to the line often, as she attacked the rack and took control of the game offensively for Prescott. Photo by Reagan Hoverman

Prescott, River Falls girls basketball compete in RF scrimmage

By Reagan Hoverman

After starting the season with the first official practice on Monday, Nov. 7, the Prescott and River Falls High School girls' basketball teams competed in an early-season scrimmage on Friday, Nov. 11, in River Falls along with Hudson and Somerset.

Although none of the games kept recorded scores or official stats, it was the first time in the 2022-23 season that the local girls' basketball programs got to see live competition against other area schools.

The Prescott Cardinals played the first game of the afternoon docket against the Hudson Raiders. Each game consisted of four 12-minute quarters of running clock. Throughout the first game, Prescott appeared to be running its offense through junior forward Lila Posthuma, who earned First-Team All-Conference honors in the Middle Border last season.

Other familiar faces took to the floor, including senior Katrina Budworth, who was selected as the Middle Border Conference Player of the Year last season, senior Izzy Matzek who was a Second-Team All-Conference selection and senior Rhi Stutz who reprises her role in the starting lineup.

Throughout that debut scrimmage against Hudson, Prescott pushed the pace and worked to get off the glass quickly and push the pace in transition. First-year head coach Owen Hamilton, who served as an assistant under former head coach Joan Korfhage last season, spoke about the Cardinals' identity this season.

"I love to get it out into transition, especially with the girls that we have," Hamilton said. "We have quick, fast and athletic girls. The same thing goes for other teams though, they're going to want to go to transition so we've got to get back and we're going to work on that. As much as we want to do it, other teams are going to want to do it too."

Even as a sophomore last season, Posthuma played a pivotal role for that Cardinals team that finished the season with a 19-8 record as the Middle Border Conference champions and made a run to the Sectional Semifinal.

Throughout last season, Posthuma proved to be an effective scorer but often looked to distribute to her teammates instead of filling up the box score by herself. In the scrimmage against Hudson, she was much more aggressive, which coach Hamilton believes is Posthuma's continued growth as a player.

"I think she's coming out of her shell even more than she did last year," Hamilton said. "We're hoping those shots (that she took to-night) are the shots that she's going to be taking all the time. I've talked to her a lot about being confident in her shot and knowing that she's always going to be one of the best players on the court."

Prescott capped off the evening with a game against River Falls in which the Cardinals continued to push the pace in transition and gain experience against a much-improved Wildcats roster. After the scrimmage concluded, Hamilton spoke about his team's first live action of the year.

"I thought we started a little slow, but we definitely built up," Hamilton said. "It's tough to come out with four days of practice and expect the girls to be doing everything in midseason form, which obviously I wasn't. The things that we need to tighten up are the

things I was expecting to have to tighten up. Overall, pretty happy with how today went."

Prescott will play its first official game of the season on Tuesday, Nov. 15, at home against Elk Mound, a team that went 19-7 last season and played in a Regional Championship game. That contest will begin at Prescott High School at 7 p.m.

River Falls Wildcats Scrimmage

The River Falls girls' basketball team began its Friday night scrimmage with a game against Prescott and then played the latter half of the back-to-back against the Somerset Spartans.

For River Falls head coach Ian Sticht, Friday night's scrimmage was a reassurance that his roster will likely be much better than last season, especially having not lost a single player to graduation.

The Wildcats return the entire starting lineup including standout seniors Olivia Pizzi and Ella Peters. Junior Jordan Schwantz, who finished last season second on the team in both points and rebounds per game to only the aforementioned Peters, returns to the point as an interior force.

Point guard Keyah Strop returns for her junior campaign after an impressive sophomore season that included just over nine points per game, which was third on the team, and nearly three assists per game, a figure that led the team.

River Falls, Prescott and all of the other teams at the scrimmage fell into the same boat of a quick turnaround after Monday's first official practice of the season. Peters, Schwantz and Pizzi appeared to have all taken a collective leap, as they controlled the pace of the game in the scrimmage and limited turnovers, something the Wildcats as a whole struggled with last season.

Pizzi made a noticeable jump in scoring, as she was regularly hitting jumpers from various locations around the floor throughout both games. Peters continues to orchestrate the Wildcats' offense and Schwantz provides that interior presence that will give less physical teams fits throughout the season.

"Yeah, I think we expect more of ourselves (this season)," Sticht said after the scrimmage. "We've still got to win games and perform, but I think we took our sophomore lumps last year. I think we will be better and more consistent. More consistency across the board is how we will find success this season."

Consistency will be a huge aspect of this year's Lady Wildcats team. There were instances last season where the stars would align and River Falls would knock off Hudson, as it did in the 46-41 win over the Raiders on Dec. 3 last year.

There were also instances where River Falls would go on extended losing streaks, including a six-game skid from Dec. 9 to Jan. 7 last season. This season will be about consistency, as coach Sticht and the girls have talked about.

"I think they have a better mindset going into the year and they think that we're going to have a better year," Sticht said. "They understood last year that we weren't as consistent as we needed to be and our practices weren't as good as they needed to be."

River Falls will begin its regular season with the first official game on Tuesday, Nov. 15, on the road against the Ellsworth Panthers. That game is slated to begin at 7 p.m.



Prescott head coach Chad Salay speaks at the podium about his two seniors, Ava Salay and Rhi Stutz, continuing their academic and athletic careers at the collegiate level shortly before they signed their letters of intent on National Signing Day on Wednesday, Nov. 9, in Prescott. Photo by Reagan Hoverman

Salay

from Page 1

While Salay had always dreamt of putting on the Cardinal and White uniform in Madison, there were times when it appeared as if it may not happen. At one point, Salay's recruitment slowed down and internally she thought that maybe the Badgers were slipping away.

"It becomes kind of slow and you're like, 'Do none of these coaches want to talk to me anymore?' Then it all came together in like a week. I thought the week before that I didn't have a chance at Wisconsin," Salay recalled. "I stayed motivated and confident. After I won the Wisconsin Women's State Open and did some other big things they came and watched me. Then they called and offered me (the scholarship)."

It was shortly after Salay added another championship trophy to her already lengthy resume that the Badgers called and made her an official offer. At the time of the call, Salay was in a hotel room while her dad was out for dinner at a golf coaches' conference.

After she got off the phone call with the Wisconsin coaching staff, Chad Salay immediately began texting Ava asking how the call went and if there were any major updates. She wanted to tell him in person, so she played it off and waited for him to get back to the hotel. She spoke about finally revealing the big news to her biggest supporter.

"He didn't come home for like three hours after I got the offer but he kept texting and asking how the call went," Ava Salay said. "When he got there I said 'I'm going to Wisconsin!' and I held up a W while he was walking down the hallway. He picked me up and gave me a hug. That was a really special experience."

Ava Salay's record is unquestionably the best golf career in Prescott history and is likely the most accomplished athletic career across all sports for the Cardinals. She is a three-time state champion and two-time individual state champion who has set multiple course records throughout the Middle Border Conference and was named Co-Player of the Year in Wisconsin for her 2022 senior season.

Ava Salay's practice sessions have become legendary in Prescott and western Wisconsin, based on their rigor and her relentless commitment to excellence. Chad Salay spoke about Ava's work ethic and her continued success athletically.

"Ava has a quote on the wall of her room that reads 'Always earned, never given.' By now, most of you probably know the legendary practice sessions Ava puts in. She truly has lived those words these past four years," Chad Salay said. "She's earned everything she has accomplished. Ava has had a career that has been one of the most historic in the 51-year history of girls' golf in Wisconsin."

Ava Salay has an unrivaled athletic career in western Wisconsin, and certain moments remain ingrained in her mind as some of the most important of her young career. In total, she has three state champions as part of the Cardinals roster, but none have been more meaningful than the one she raised this year in Madison after winning a playoff.

"The state championship that we just won," Ava Salay said when asked about what meant everything to her. "The other two were very special to me, but the third was just insane and I don't think that moment could ever be beaten."

After graduating from Prescott in May, Ava Salay will move to Madison in the fall and begin the next chapter of her academic and athletic career as a member of the Wisconsin Badgers Women's Golf program.

Mork

from Page 1

"Notre Dame reached out to me through club baseball. It was a lot of them seeing me at tournaments and then they reached out," Mork said on National Signing Day. "I had a couple of other offers too. I've had it ingrained in my mind for a while (that I'm a Division I player)."

While Mork eventually chose Notre Dame, the Fighting Irish were not one of the first programs to make an offer. Instead, Mork had narrowed his choices down to a couple of other Division I programs, including the Wichita State Shockers. That was until Notre Dame swooped in late and made Mork an offer.

"I had it narrowed down to a couple of places, and then (Notre Dame) reached out and it opened up everything," Mork said. "It's a little bit of a relief to have a school picked out going into my senior year."

Mork has always had his sights set on playing college baseball, but it was his junior season for the Wildcats that began demanding attention from coaches throughout the country. Last year, he dominated the Big Rivers Conference, which is notorious for being one of the most challenging in the state. He was also selected as the Big Rivers Conference Pitcher of the Year.

Mork posted an impressive 5-0 record in eight total starts on the mound last season. In two of those five contests, he pitched complete-game shutouts and single-handedly propelled his team to victory. In total, he pitched just over 46 innings last year, 10 more than the second-most on the team, and allowed six fewer earned runs than the other player.

He also posted a team-low ERA of 1.36 and struck out 85 batters while only walking 11. While there are a lot of metrics that would prove Mork's dominance on the hill, perhaps none speak louder than his WHIP, which is a combination of Walks, Hits and Innings Pitched (WHIP).

Through his approximately 46 innings of work last year, Mork posted a WHIP of 0.82. For reference, anything below 1.30 is considered above average and any figure lower than 1.10 is considered elite.

While his season proved to be a breakout year, coach Bishop always knew that there was something special about Mork. Not just his lengthy frame and flamethrowing nature, but a Jordan-like mentality that makes him one of the most dominant pitchers in River Falls history.

"From the very beginning before he even pitched a high school game he told me, 'Coach, I'm not going to lose a game in my

high school career. I'm going undefeated,'" Bishop recalled of Mork before his freshman year. "The reality is that isn't going to happen. But he took that mental approach and that's the approach he takes every time he's out there. That's a confidence thing that carries over to his teammates."

There was perhaps no greater example of Mork's cutthroat, competitive mentality than the final game of his junior season, a Division I Regional Championship game on the road against BRC runner-up Eau Claire Memorial at historic Carson Park in Eau Claire.

Coach Bishop gave Mork the start that day and he began dealing immediately. Mork went deep into the ballgame, gave up no earned runs and allowed hits sparingly against that stacked Old Abes roster.

Although Eau Claire Memorial ended up beating River Falls 4-3, Mork did more than his fair share to win that game. Bishop spoke about that performance and what it said about Mork's ability to pitch well in high-pressure situations and shine when the lights were the brightest.

"You can pinpoint a few games where you can see he's really good, but that (Memorial) game, he put the team on his shoulders," Bishop said. "He did his part that day and did everything he could to try to get us a win."

Bishop, Mork and the rest of the Wildcats roster go into the season with high expectations and a lot of hope. Mork returns as River Falls' ace and has more opportunities to grow throughout the season. Bishop spoke about Mork's upcoming senior campaign.

"He lost a year because of COVID and he hasn't even had his senior year, so he's only had two years of high school baseball," Bishop said. "This is his chance to prepare himself and get ready for (Notre Dame). This will be a year of continued growth but with less stress and less pressure."

Perhaps it's part of that aforementioned mentality, but Mork already has high expectations for his senior season. He spoke about what the fans can expect throughout his final year at River Falls.

"I think expectations are high. We've got a couple of leaders that will step up this year and continue to build the program," Mork said. "We'll get some help from some underclassmen and I think we'll be very good on the throwing side. We should win the Big Rivers Conference Championship this year. Our expectations are high and so is our work ethic."

Mork will have one last dance in River Falls before moving to Indiana to continue his academic and athletic career at the University of Notre Dame as a member of the Fighting Irish men's baseball program in the fall of 2023.