The athletic carousel spins. Those riding longest, after having used up their allotted time, jump off just as new riders hop aboard. However, for a short time during high school the oldest and newest share the ride. Seniors and freshmen, polar opposites academically, clasp hands to become one. It's that kind of harmonious marriage that has helped fuel the North Penn girls swim team this season.

Seniors and freshman, the reds and violets of the scholastic rainbow, have blended magnificently to help the Maidens to an 11-2 record and the role as favorites to successfully defend their Suburban One League National Conference title at the championship meet Saturday at 9 a.m. at North Penn.

The Maidens have, as expected, received great performances by seniors Lauren French and Becca Hannings, who have district- and state-level experience. But North Penn has also been bolstered by freshmen Jan Ikeda, Mary Morris and Katie Patterson, who not only will aid the Maidens in the league title meet, but who have all qualified for the District One Class AAA Swimming Championships to be held Feb. 29-March 1 at La Salle University.

"The freshmen that come into this program are aware of the tradition we have and they want to live up to that," North Penn coach Kristen Bartlewitz said. "And our freshmen this year are very good. Jan, Mary and Katie have swum very well. Jan made the district cut in the 200 IM and the 100 butterfly, and she's second seeded in the league meet in the fly behind Lauren. Mary also made the district cut in both those events. Katie qualified for districts in the fly as well and also the 100 backstroke."

Ikeda and Morris also will swim on the 200 medley relay on Saturday, and Morris will take part in the 200 free relay. Patterson will swim on a B-team relay.

Despite their high skill levels, the freshmen, Bartlewitz is fully aware, are still freshmen.

"You can't put a lot of undue pressure on them," she said. "I don't push or totally challenge freshmen. You challenge upperclassmen — do this, don't do that — but you can't with freshmen."

"You have to choose your words carefully with the freshmen. You have to get your point across in subtle ways."

For example, during one particular practice, Bartlewitz was working with freshmen on how to make a proper flip turn. But instead of belaboring the finer points, she turned to a senior to make the point of just how important the flip turn is.

"I called Becca over and told her, "Tell the girls what you missed going to states by in the 500 free last year,"" Bartlewitz said. "Becca told them she missed going by one-one-hundredth of a second. She told them that's how much difference a good turn can make. She got the point across for me."

There's yet another challenge for the freshmen swimmers at North Penn High School: They don't attend North Penn High School, which houses grades 10
“Sometimes they get to practice 45 minutes late because they’re coming from another school,” Bartlewitz said. “They’re freshmen; they don’t attend the high school, and they rush to get a bus to get to practice.

“Sometimes I hear the freshmen complaining in the locker room about having to rush to catch the bus. Our upperclassmen hear them and tell them, "Suck it up. We had to do it."

Bartlewitz said such scolding by the upperclassmen is designed to draw the freshmen into the fold than to isolate them.

“Hey, the upperclassmen also give the freshman helpful tips,” she said. “They heard the freshmen complaining they didn’t even have time to brush their teeth because they were rushing to catch a bus. So the seniors shared a trick they used when they were freshmen: brush your teeth on the bus. When you need to spit, do it in a Ziploc bag, seal it and throw it away when you get home.”

Ah, bonding. It’s a wonderful thing.

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