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# Knights Win Thriller Over Cardinals

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By Brian Weaver

TOWAMENCIN - With one race to go in the boys' swim meet between Upper Dublin and North Penn on Friday, the players turned to the crowd and pleaded with them to quiet down.

They couldn't hear the starter. Even though he had a megaphone. And they were just meters from the loudspeakers.

In one of the most anticipated early-season matchups of the year, North Penn squeaked out a win in the last race of the meet to down a determined Cardinal squad, 95.5-90.5. The victors swam a pool-record time in the last race to seal the deal in a clash between two of the top programs in the area.

But forgive the Knights if they looked confused before the final race.

This was supposed to be a home meet, in their school, in their Rick Carroll Natatorium. But there were shouts of "UP-PER DUB-LIN, UP-PER DUB-LIN!" and not, "North Penn!" echoing off of the walls. And a Cardinal was running up and down the front of the bleachers. And somehow, inexplicably, Upper Dublin had fought all the way back and was leading with just the 400 Freestyle Relay left in the contest by a slim 86.5-85.5 margin.

The Upper Dublin faithful were in a frenzy and looked to be the fifth man on the relay squad, their spirit pushing their team to victory.

North Penn senior Stephan Hoch wasn't about to let his teammates fold in the face of this twist, nor did he want Upper Dublin to get the impression that this was their house.

"We wanted to win. We wanted to show them who was boss," he said.

If his performance is any indication, he meant every word.

The senior led off the relay with a blistering personal best, giving North Penn an early edge. Head coach Brian Daly knew that this was exactly what his team needed.

"To go 48 [seconds] to lead off the relay is huge," he said. "Stephan has never been under 49. When your seniors step up, the whole roster gets the impression that it's go time."

"It definitely pumped everybody up. It was definitely my best time ever," Hoch agreed. "We tell the young guys to get mentally prepared every day, make sure they're not eating junk. [Upper Dublin has] been our rivals for a while. They're a very good team. We've been waiting for this. It was marked on the calendar."

The entire match was exciting, but one only had to see the last race to understand how close the competition was.

After Hoch's blistering first leg, the second leg saw the Knights take real control. After a quick first split, Jack Else opened up his lead in the last 50 meters. It was over a second by the start of the third leg, but Upper Dublin chipped away in the third leg, the lead often only half a length until Craig Hennessey turned on the jets to pull away in the final 25 meters.

North Penn's pool record time of 3:14.76 gave them the margin of victory they needed, and for good measure, they captured third place, as well.

The entire meet mirrored the last race.

After trading points in the first two events, North Penn started to widen the gap in the third event, taking first place in the 200 Individual Medley, the 50 Freestyle, and the 100 Butterfly.

Upper Dublin hung with them, picking up place points in each, but the Knight winners slowly began to take over the match. It didn't hurt that the home team was also riding a cushion from the diving events, which took place before the swimming started on this night.

The North Penn divers swept the top three spots with the trio of Zac Nees, Mike Kohler, and Caleb Hill. Nees led the way with his 307.05, a score that had Daly impressed at the end of the meet.

"It was his first time over 300," Daly explained. "I think I'm going to have to buy more 3s [for the record board]. We've never had anybody over 300 in this facility, and districts are held here every year. He just looks confident, he's having fun."

Like any of that bothered the Cardinals.

Upper Dublin slowly chipped away at the lead. Calvin Starosta (100 Free and 100 Back) and Dan Fitzgerald (200 Free and 500 Free) both notched a pair of wins to keep the match close, and by the time Fitzgerald and his teammates touched the wall to win the 200 Free Relay, the Cardinals had pulled to within 3 at 71.5-68.5.

Starosta's 100 Back victory got the score to within one at 78.5-77.5, and then –despite a win from the Knight's Nick Ortlieb – Upper Dublin finished 2-3-4 in the 100 Breast to take the lead at 86.5-85.5, setting the stage for one of the more exciting finishes this side of Beijing.

Upper Dublin head coach Lisa Fantini was proud of her team's effort after the meet.

"We swam fast and had fast times, that's all you can do," she said. "To be in a great facility is exciting, it doesn't matter whose pool. But they're learning to not be intimidated, building their confidence."

That confidence allowed the Cardinals to hang tough until the last race in this rematch between the top two finishers in last year's District 1 AAA Championships. Last February, the Cardinals ended the Knights' streak of 19 straight district titles with a win in – what else – the 400 Free Relay, the last meet of the race.

Daly was left in awe of this performance that saw almost everything the same save the final score.

"Coming into the meet, we kind of scripted out what we thought was going to happen," he said. "You try to project what the other team is going to do, and what your team is going to do, and both teams exceeded my expectations wildly."

The girls' side of the action saw a little less uncertainty as the home team set the tone early in a 117-69

win. In the opening race, the 200 Medley Relay team of Samantha Deana, Casey O'Neill, Jan Ikeda, and Heather Fellmeth set a pool record, winning the race by more than four seconds. The team never looked back.

Nicole Dibonaventura put out a solid effort to help the Maidens stay firmly ahead of the Cardinals. She followed her win in the 100 Free with a key anchor leg in the 200 Free Relay. North Penn put distance between the teams in every leg, but on the last lap Upper Dublin had closed the gap completely, coming all the way back and looking for a moment like they might make the race a dead heat. But it was Dibonaventura stealing the points, holding her own in a spirited final 25 to keep the Cardinals from closing the gap after nine events.

With the victories, the Knights take this round of the Upper Dublin-North Penn clash. But keep an eye on the calendar. A lot of meets come between now and February, but the District meet is just over two months away.

Don't think they won't be looking for each other once they're there.

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