

Newport's Merrell helps Saints' drive for five



Crean Lutheran High School's Eva Merrell, a Newport Beach resident, won the girls' 100 yard backstroke at the 2017 CIF Southern Section Swimming Division 2 Finals on Saturday. (Raul Roa / Daily Pilot)



By **Matt Szabo**

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RIVERSIDE — Even without a taper, Newport Beach resident Eva Merrell dominated every event she competed in Saturday afternoon at the CIF Southern Section Division 2 swimming championships.

As it turned out, they were just the performances that Crean Lutheran needed.

Merrell helped the Saints win their fifth straight CIF-SS title in exciting fashion at Riverside City College. Crean Lutheran finished with 247 points, edging second-place Redlands East Valley with 233.

Merrell, a junior who swam for Corona del Mar as a freshman before taking last year off from high school swimming to focus on Olympic Trials, was a part of meet records in all four of her relays and individual events. She swam leadoff on the 200 medley relay that also featured Jimena Martinez, Mandy Brenner and Elise

Garcia touched in 1:40.77, an Orange County record time. And she swam anchor on the 200 free relay, in which Merrell, Brenner, Journey Werner and Garcia also touched first in 1:34.89.

Individually, she won the 100 butterfly in 52.51 and the 100 backstroke in 53.12, also both meet record times. But she encountered some adversity before the latter event.

"I was sitting behind the blocks with my legs out, and someone tripped over me and stepped right on my ankle," Merrell said. "It hurt pretty bad, and it really took me out of my mental zone. But I knew I had to step up for Crean and have a good race ... It was definitely a competitive field and it's good to have races like that."

Among swimmers for local schools, Laguna Beach junior Kasey Karkoska and Sage Hill sophomore Jason Schreiber both qualified for a pair of championship finals.

Karkoska tied for seventh in the 100 butterfly in 55.84, and she was eighth in the 100 backstroke in 56.55. Both were off her school-record times in those events.

"I just swam slow," Karkoska said. "I guess I didn't train well enough. I went the same time like just two years ago. It just [stinks]. Better than last year, I guess. I just feel like I always do poorly at this meet, and I don't know why."

Karkoska also swam in both Laguna relays at finals. The 400 free relay team of Karkoska, Bella Baldrige, Kyla Whitelock and Ella Judd, which set the school record in the event at Division 2 preliminaries, finished 14th in 3:36.63. The 200 medley team, with Karkoska, Judd, Grace Houlahan and Baldrige, placed 15th in 1:52.63.

"I think they did great," said Laguna Coach Kari Damato, who saw the Breakers girls finish 14th in Division 2 as a team. "I think it's an accomplishment just to make it here, and I'm very proud of them."

Schreiber, making his first appearance at a CIF final, lowered his own school record in the boys' 200 IM and placed ninth in 1:54.37. He then finished ninth as well in the 100 breaststroke, swimming a 58.90.

"I wasn't as happy with my 100 breaststroke," said Schreiber, who helped the Lightning win their third straight Academy League title this season. "I wanted to break 58, but I added time. My 200 IM, I was really excited to go fast. I went out faster than I did [at preliminaries], but I sort of died a little bit. But I'm happy [that I dropped time]."

"I was really excited I was able to make it [to CIF finals] this year. It was a big jump from last year ... I'm really happy with my progress in short course this season."

Sage Hill senior Taras Polakoff finished 12th in the boys' 100 backstroke, lowering his own school record to 52.44.

"It's the last race of my high school career, and it's the best way I could have pictured it," Polakoff said.

The lone swimmer from a Costa Mesa high school at finals was Estancia's Cobi White, in the boys' 50 free. White finished 17th in 22.14 seconds, around a half-second off his personal best from Orange Coast League finals.

"I'm not used to competing with people really fast," White said. "It's kind of eye-opening. Next year, hopefully I'll come back and do better."

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