

Kitayama's focus helps Knights get in synch

By Tom Dixon For the Camera
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BOULDER, Colo. — When 5A state swimming preliminaries begin Friday, third-ranked Fairview will take aim at top-seed Cherry Creek, and helping lead the way will be deceptively-fast backstroke junior Taylor Kitayama.

"Cherry Creek has a lot of incredible backstroke swimmers and I just want to try and get in there and place higher than I did last year," Kitayama said. "I was fourth."

Thanks to some new, high-tech swimsuits Kitayama is hoping to break some new records along the way.

"It's going to be a really fast meet because of the new suits that came out," she explained. "From what I understand it makes you more buoyant in the water. I swam in mine the other day and I dropped about a second per 50."

Even though Fairview coach Bob Smartt said Cherry Creek "is a lock to win state," he's hoping that Fairview has a mental edge that can carry it past Regis, and he thinks Kitayama can provide it.

"Taylor is our backstroke swimmer on the 200 medley relay (the first event) so she sets the tone for our team at all the big meets," Smartt said of Kitayama, who is ranked fifth in 100 backstroke and 10th in 100 fly.

And racing isn't even her first priority.

Kitayama has competed in synchronized swimming for eight years and last year placed ninth with her solo team at Age Group Synchro Nationals in New York.

"I think of racing as my fallback if I get injured and can't do synchro anymore, or if speed swimming can get me into an academic college I want to get into," Kitayama said.

Kitayama became interested in speed swimming only three years ago when she attended a camp run by Smartt.

"Just the way he trains, and the sets that we do, really improves our swimming," Kitayama said of why the camp convinced her to join the team. "And my brother swam for him in high school."

Due to her rigorous academic schedule and first love, synchronized swimming, Kitayama can't come to all the Fairview practices and usually has to leave early.

"I actually try to go to every practice, at least for a little while," Kitayama said. "In January I try to really pick up my workouts to try and get in the best shape I can for state."

Usually missing practices is a surefire way to get cut from any team, but Smartt understands.

"We would love to have Taylor more hours per week. But she is borderline All-American this year in her 100 backstroke, so we can't complain," Smartt said.

Kitayama's success in backstroke is even more impressive because she is only 5'2", a disadvantage against her much taller competition.

"I always lose about a foot off the wall," Kitayama said. "I just work on my underwater kicking off the walls and I can usually make up that extra foot."

Her coach said that her synchronized swimming skills are a huge asset in races.

"Synchro has taught her great feel for the water that enables her to swim with distance per stroke," Smartt said. "The flexibility and the breath control developed in synchro are very helpful with her underwater kick outs off each wall."

Kitayama hopes that between her abilities as a synchronized and speed swimmer she'll be going to either Stanford or Ohio State, two of the top swim teams in the nation.

In the meantime, her favorite thing about racing is the camaraderie.

"The relay runs are so much fun, especially the last race," Kitayama said. "We have this special cheer we do: We spell out psyched really loud."

"It's worked well in the past."

That intensity and team unity is tangible in the pool.

"She brings great intensity and focus to her training and makes the others in her lane faster," Smartt said. "For example, eight of her training partners, none of whom are club swimmers, were able to make the state qualifying standard in the 100 backstroke."

Still, in the end, many swimming races are individual efforts and, even in synchronized swimming, that's where Kitayama shines.

"When you watch her synchro solo routine, it is a joy to see her combine beauty, power and flexibility," Smartt said. "She has synchro moves that you didn't know were possible."

Fairview's hoping that if Kitayama can bring all that beauty, power and flexibility to her events at state this weekend maybe they can also do a few things no one thought possible.