

Cherry Creek queen of 5A swimming

By Angie Mudd, Special to the Rocky

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FORT COLLINS – Cherry Creek winning its fifth straight Class 5A girls swimming crown may not have been a huge surprise. And strong performances by the Bruins' Brandon sisters may be not have shocked many people either.

But Loren and Bonnie Brandon aren't being humble when they say they were surprised with their performances – only because they surpassed even their own expectations in Saturday's Class 5A state swimming championships Saturday at Edora Pool and Ice Center in Fort Collins.

Senior Loren Brandon won two individual races (the 200 and 500 freestyle) and was a part of the Bruins' state-record-setting 400-freestyle relay team with her freshman sister, Bonnie. And not to be outdone by her older sister, Bonnie Brandon had four victories – in addition to the 400-freestyle relay, she won two individual races in record fashion (50 freestyle, 100 backstroke) and helped Cherry Creek break an 11-year-old state record in the 200-medley relay.

“We had a great day,” said Loren Brandon, who will head to the University of Minnesota in the fall. “It was a lot of fun, we are so happy. I am really surprised with how well we did here today. It was a really great experience for us to swim together this year, it brought us a lot closer. It's really nice to be able to share this with my sister.”

Cherry Creek won the team title with 369 points, but didn't distance itself from the pack as much as the Bruins anticipated. Fairview finished second with 331 points, while Regis Jesuit finished third with 235.

Loren Brandon defended her title in the 500 freestyle, but she shocked herself earlier in the meet when she swiped the 200 freestyle. Brandon, who was the runner-up in the event last year, was trailing at the final turn before she put on the heat for the final few yards to edge out teammate Jordan Mattern for the victory.

“I did not come in to this meet expecting to win that at all,” she said. “That's kind of an on-and-off event for me because I'm either on, or it's not so good. The 500 free is my main event, but the 200 free was so much more exciting because it was not expected at all.”

And while Bonnie Brandon is one of the top backstroke swimmers in the nation (she competed in the 200 backstroke in last summer's Olympic Trials), the 50 freestyle has never been her strength. But when coach Eric Craven decided to put the 6-foot-2 freshman in the 50 freestyle, she didn't know what to expect.

With last year's co-champions, Tricia Nelson of Fort Collins and Shelley Perkins of Chatfield, in the mix, Brandon was able to steal her first individual Colorado state title with a Class 5A record of 23.47 (the old record was 23.56 set by Fort Collins Anna Turner in 2004).

Nelson finished second and Perkins third.

"I've always had a pretty good start," said Bonnie Brandon, who set the state record in the 100 backstroke with a time of 54.77. "Once I got off the block, I thought, 'Wow, I'm ahead. This is good.' It felt really weird. It felt like I was not sprinting. It felt like I was kind of flying through the air because I couldn't feel the water. But it felt like I was going really fast, ahead of everyone off the turns. I was really happy, and then I touched the wall first."

Rampart junior Jenna Gregoire wasn't thrilled with her fourth-place finish in the race, but it only made her that much more determined to defend her 100-freestyle crown. Gregoire swam a steady race before finishing strong to claim a classification record of 51.30.

"The 50 free is always a difficult race because anything can happen," Gregoire said. "It was just like last year, where I was seeded first going into the finals and then I didn't swim the way I wanted to. But just like last year, I pulled through for the 100. I am so relieved right now."

Smoky Hill sophomore Caroline Piehl wasn't disappointed in her quest to defend her 200-individual-medley crown. Piehl took over halfway through the race and finished in state record fashion with a time of 2:02.96, breaking a six-year-old record (2:03.23 was set by Fort Collins' Carley Beaudreau in 2003).

"I didn't know I got the state record until I got out of the pool," she said. "I wasn't expecting this kind of race at all. Going into high school, I would have never thought I could do that."

Regis Jesuit had some outstanding performances by some underclassmen, with sophomore Alexandra Todd's win in the 100 butterfly (56.10) and freshman Lauren Stoeckle dominating the 100 breaststroke. Stoeckle, who set the Class 5A record in Friday's prelims, outdid herself in setting the state record in the finals with a time of 1:04.27 (the old record was 1:04.28 set by St. Mary's Academy's Ellie Freeman in 2007).

"I totally underestimated the competition going into this meet," said Stoeckle, who was on Regis Jesuit's second-place 200 medley relay squad. "I did not expect everyone to be going so fast. I did everything I could to win, I just really wanted to win it so bad."

After finishing fifth in 1-meter diving last year, and all of the divers who finished ahead of her graduated, Ralston Valley junior Raleigh Williams knew she had a shot to win the diving competition this year. But she said her mental game wasn't up to par during and after the preliminary rounds.

"My head was getting to me, I was letting other divers get to me, and I didn't think I was doing very well," she said. "To me, my meet wasn't going the best. But right before finals, I told myself, 'I want this. I want this.' And I turned it up."

She said after her reverse dive in the second round, she realized that the championship was within reach.

“I got out of the pool and saw what my scores were, and thought that I really could win this,” she said. “I am just so excited. I am so happy I was able to do it.”