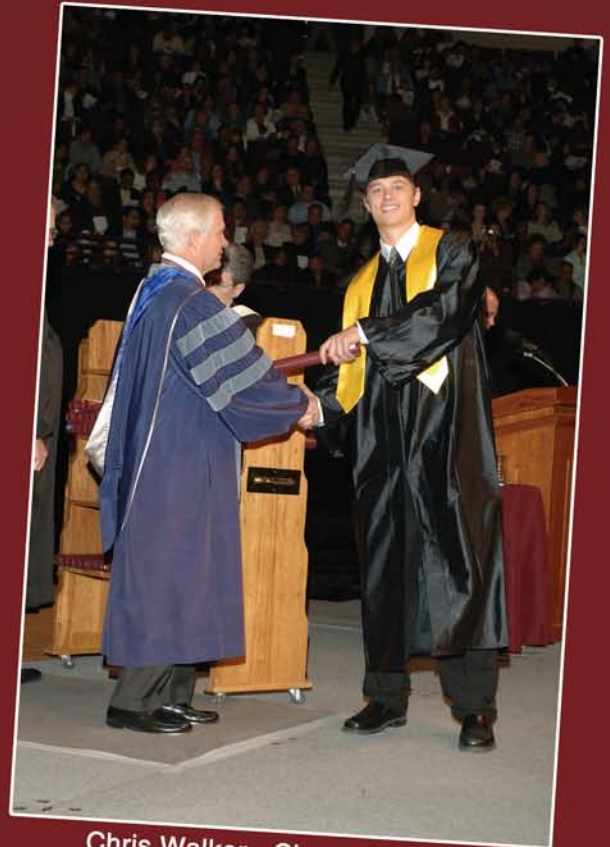


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Runners Up No More

STORY: true brown

Aggies eyeing NAAs after record-setting Big 12 meet

Rebecca Sturdy knew going into this season that, for her, this was it. As one of the four seniors on the Texas A&M women's swimming and diving team, she knew that her four years in Aggieland, complete with countless hours of practice and workouts, would all come down to a few races at Rec Center Natatorium at the Big 12 Championships. What she couldn't know way back in the fall was exactly how the magical script would unfold on Feb. 17.

On the fourth and final night of the Big 12 Championships, Sturdy and the Aggies found themselves facing a five-point deficit to eight-time defending Big 12 champion Texas. Since the meet's final event, the 400-yard freestyle relay, featured a six-point differential between first and second places, everyone in the natatorium knew that a first-place finish would be required to end the Longhorn's remarkable reign.

Sure enough, with Sturdy swimming A&M's anchor leg, the Aggies' combination of Julia Wilkinson, Codie Hansen, Triin Aljand and Sturdy blitzed the Longhorns by more than two seconds, clinching A&M's first-ever Big 12 title.

"I had no doubt in my mind that it was going to go our way," said Sturdy, who has battled back from injuries the last two seasons. "It was (a sense of) destiny, almost. I took what I knew I could do best and did it. No one can ever take this away from us."

After a season of dominating their competition during an undefeated dual meet season, it was fitting that the Aggies continued their domination at the conference finals. A&M swimmers captured wins in 15 of the meet's 18 swimming events, and also scored all three post-meet awards for the second consecutive year. Coach Steve Bultman took home Coach of the Meet, while Christine Marshall and Alia Atkinson brought home Swimmer of the Meet and Newcomer of the Meet, respectively.

"It's very rewarding," said Bultman, who has earned at least a share of Coach of the Meet honors in five of the last six seasons. "It's so much fun for me to work with swimmers who want to get better and listen and work in partnership with the coaches. We have a lot of girls that work so hard, so to finally see them get the payoff—that's what makes coaching so special."

For the first time ever, the team is undefeated after the conference meet. The Aggies have also qualified a number of swimmers for the NCAA Championships next weekend, meaning that last season's 11th-place finish at the NCAA Championships will likely be the next record to fall. For the first time under Bultman, the fifth-ranked Aggies are in a position to make a run at a few individual titles, if not the team title.

A&M's conference crown-clinching 400-yard freestyle relay owns the No. 2

time in the country this year. The team of Wilkinson, Atkinson, Sturdy and Marshall also own the nation's second-fastest time in the 400-yard medley relay. In all, the Aggies clocked a remarkable 29 NCAA automatic qualifying times and produced a jaw-dropping 15 Big 12 champions.

The fruits of their labors are certainly well-deserved. A&M's swimmers had practiced all year with an eye toward the Big 12 and NCAA Championships.

"Our main goal was to be undefeated and try to get as many NCAA qualifiers as possible," said Marshall, who won conference titles in the 200-yard individual medley and 200-yard freestyle. "It's all about hard work and having fun. You can work hard and be so stressed out, but I think the main thing is that we have so much fun while doing it. We might be working hard, but we're not afraid to joke around and have fun."

With NCAA's taking place March 8-10 in Minneapolis, Minn., and a team that consists of mostly underclassmen, Bultman's squad seems perched on the precipice of what could be a run of unprecedented success.

"They really bought into (being an elite program)," Bultman said. "They've really believed that 'Yes, we can contend to win the Big 12 and can contend to be a top 10 team at NAAs. The focus and the believing and the determination has just gotten better and better, and this year was definitely the best."