



SW

SWIMMING WORLD

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HELLO LADIES

NCAA WOMEN'S D1 CHAMPIONSHIP PREVIEW



TWO-TEAM TUSSLE

Defending champion Georgia and the University of California should contend for this year's women's NCAA team title, with Cal primed to claim the trophy it was expected to win last year.

STORY BY **JEFF COMMINGS** • PHOTOS BY **PETER H. BICK**

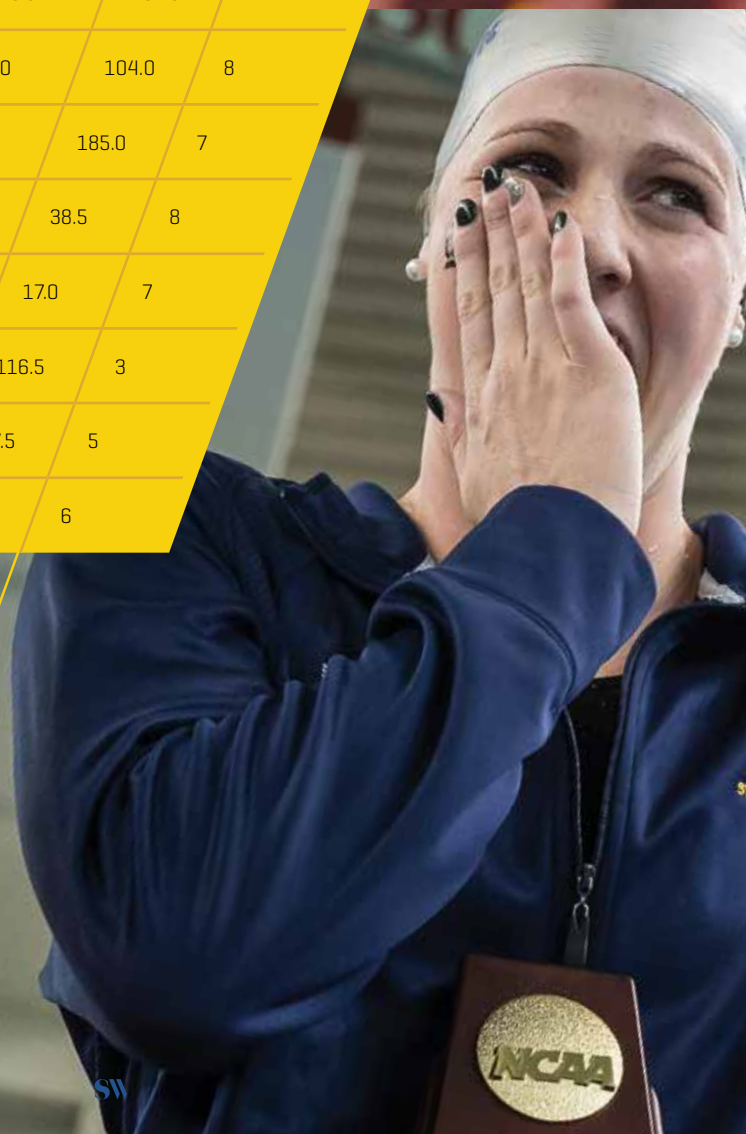
SWIMMING WORLD MAGAZINE'S TOP 10

SCHOOL		LAST YEAR'S FINISH	LAST YEAR'S POINTS	POINTS RETURNING	POINTS LOST	SCORERS RETURNING
1. CALIFORNIA	3	386.0	320.5	65.5	11	
2. GEORGIA	1	528.0	333.0	195.0	11	
3. STANFORD	2	402.5	170.0	232.5	7	
4. USC	5	252.0	148.0	104.0	8	
5. TEXAS A&M	4	336.0	151.0	185.0	7	
6. MINNESOTA	10	136.5	98.0	38.5	8	
7. VIRGINIA	11	123.0	106.0	17.0	7	
8. FLORIDA	6	239.0	122.5	116.5	3	
9. TENNESSEE	7	223.0	105.5	117.5	5	
10. TEXAS	9	144.0	66.0	78.0	6	

The disqualification in the 200 medley relay at last year's NCAA Division I Championships likely still stings for the California women's swimming and diving team. The Golden Bears were on pace to win the team trophy, but the DQ turned the tide quickly toward Georgia, and the Bulldogs were the ones celebrating victory.

Teri McKeever's squad at Cal is not likely to repeat last year's missteps, but as we have seen at numerous championships, anything can happen. Still, it's likely to end up as a two-team race for the team title.

Following is a rundown of *Swimming World's* picks for the top 10 teams at this month's meet, March 19-21, in Greensboro, N.C.:





PICTURED > Olivia Smoliga, Georgia



1. CALIFORNIA GOLDEN BEARS

Last year: 3rd [386 points] Returning points: 320.5

A few of California's top swimmers did not hit their tapers last March, but if all goes according to plan this month, the Golden Bears should win the meet. Led by Missy Franklin, the Bears are set to win multiple events, including the 800 free relay. All four women from that relay will be back, but one of them is likely to be replaced by freshman Cierra Runge, who is looking to score lots of points in her NCAA championship debut. If Franklin swims the 500 free as expected, she and Runge will give reigning champion Brittany MacLean of Georgia a major challenge. Rachel Bootsma and Elizabeth Pelton could be the 100 and 200 backstroke champions, respectively, while freshman Jasmine Mau will fill a major gap in sprint butterfly. Cal's best event last year was the 200 free, where the Bears scored 47 points.

Strengths: backstroke, freestyle / Weaknesses: breaststroke



2. GEORGIA BULLDOGS

Last year: 1st [528 points] Returning points: 333

The loss of Shannon Vreeland and Melanie Margalis to graduation will hurt Georgia in the relays and stroke events. Freshman Kylie Stewart could bring in some big points and might be the spoiler for Cal in the backstroke events. Her lifetime best of 1:49.85 would have won the 200 back last year. Chantal Van Landeghem had a great summer in international competition, winning the bronze in the 50 free at the Pan Pacific Championships. Expect her and reigning champion Olivia Smoliga to excel in sprint freestyle. Brittany MacLean, defending champ in the 500 and 1650, and Amber McDermott will likely continue Georgia's strong distance freestyle tradition, but relays are the big stumbling block. Georgia will have to outscore Cal in two or three relays in order to stay within reach of a repeat title.

Strengths: freestyle, backstroke / Weaknesses: breaststroke, IM



3. STANFORD CARDINAL

Last year: 2nd [402.5 points] Returning points: 170

Losing a combined 106 points in individual events from graduated seniors Maya Dirado and Felicia Lee hurts Stanford's chances at keeping pace with Cal and Georgia. So does the departure of Maddy Schaefer, who scored in the sprint freestyle and was crucial on relay duty. Freshman Simone Manuel will be a major help, likely winning the 50 and 100 freestyles and scoring in the top four in the 200 free. Manuel will help greatly in the maximum four relays she's allowed to swim, but that might not be enough for her team to break into the top two again. The Cardinal should find themselves comfortably in third, but only if the rest of the team puts together the same type of performances as last year's. Olympian Lia Neal should do well in her sophomore year, while the breaststroke duo of Sarah Haase and Katie Olsen should swim in the championship heats to make up the deficits.

Strengths: sprint freestyle / Weaknesses: IM



4. USC TROJANS

Last year: 5th [252 points] Returning points: 148

Dave Salo's squad hit a lot of snags last year at NCAAs. Many of the athletes expected to compete in the top eight found themselves in the consolation finals, or failed to score points altogether. Chelsea Chenault, if she's on her game, could be a top-eight finisher in the 200 and 500 freestyles, and give the Trojans a bigger boost in the relays. Jasmine Tosky could challenge for the 200 butterfly title, while USA Swimming national champion Kendyl Stewart should move up from scoring zero points in the 100 fly last year to challenging for the win. Haley Ishimatsu is primed to win her third platform diving title, but must improve on the springboards if USC is to finish fourth.

Strengths: butterfly, freestyle, diving / Weaknesses: IM, backstroke



5. TEXAS A&M AGGIES

Last year: 4th [336 points] Returning points: 151

When you lose major scorers such as multiple champions Breeja Larson and Cammille Adams, you tend to view the following season as a rebuilding year. But Texas A&M could still fight for a top-five placing if its relays improve. The entire 800 free relay team that placed seventh last year is back. Senior Sarah Henry will be counted on to repeat her standout performances in the 500, 1650 and 400 IM, in which she scored 41 individual points. Lili Ibanez will be the leader for A&M's relays and will need to get second swims in her individual events. The Aggies' highest-scoring event last year was the 200 breast. This year, Ashley McGregor will take Larson's place as the team's top breaststroker.

Strengths: freestyle / Weaknesses: backstroke, butterfly

**6. MINNESOTA GOPHERS**

Last year: 10th [136.5 points] Returning points: 98

On the surface, it would look like Minnesota doesn't have the necessary firepower to move up four spots from last year's finish, but the Gophers will rely on the strengths of freshman Brooke Zeiger, who can score big in the 400 IM and 200 back. She could also contribute points in the 500 free or 200 IM, depending on which event head coach Kelly Kremer decides Zeiger's talents will be best used. Junior Kierra Smith (sixth last year in the 200 breast) appears to be the Gophers' best chance for an individual title, but she'll need the swim of her life to beat reigning 200 breast champion and American record holder (2:04.06) Emma Reaney of Notre Dame. **Strengths:** breaststroke, backstroke, freestyle, IM / **Weaknesses:** butterfly

**7. VIRGINIA CAVALIERS**

Last year: 11th [123 points] Returning points: 106

Virginia lost only 17 points from last year's squad, and the possibility of breaking into the top 10 rests squarely on Leah Smith. The sophomore swam well at last year's NAAs, but had an even better long course season, qualifying for the World Championships in the 800 free relay and the World University Games. Smith missed the big final of the 500 last March, placing ninth with a time that would have scored in the top three. She also finished 17th in the 200 free. Though Georgia's MacLean appears unstoppable in the 1650, Smith could sneak into second and improve on last year's third-place performance. Courtney Bartholomew just missed a win in the 200 back, and though the competition will be tough, she will need to place in the top three in both backstrokes and give Virginia big leads in the medley relays if Virginia is to celebrate its best finish in team history.

Strengths: backstroke, distance freestyle / **Weaknesses:** butterfly, relays**8. FLORIDA GATORS**

Last year: 6th [239 points] Returning points: 122.5

With only three members of last year's squad back to represent the Gators at the NAAs, Florida will have the toughest time of any team in the top 10. Natalie Hinds has been having a tremendous season so far, and she'll be leaned on heavily to score not only in all three of her individual events, but also possibly get a top-three finish in the 50 free. Hinds has also been one of the top relay performers this season. Sinead Russell and Ashlee Linn will do well, but Florida lacks a breaststroker as strong as Hilda Luthersdottir was. Theresa Michalak will be needed to score in the IM events, and will likely help as well with breaststroke on the medley relays. **Strengths:** sprint freestyle, backstroke / **Weaknesses:** breaststroke, IM, butterfly

**9. TENNESSEE LADY VOLUNTEERS**

Last year: 7th [223 points] Returning points: 105.5

Tennessee returns fewer than half of its points from the 2014 championships, but the Lady Volunteers could still place in the top 10. As always, relays are the big determining factor for a team's placement, and Tennessee has the talent needed to place in the top eight once again in the 200 free and 200 medley relays. Junior Faith Johnson (freestyle) and senior Molly Hannis (breaststroke/IM) are back and should be the team's top scorers in individual events.

Strengths: breaststroke, sprint freestyle, relays / **Weaknesses:** butterfly, IM**10. TEXAS LONGHORNS**

Last year: 9th [144 points] Returning points: 66

Texas will be helped greatly by the return of Sarah Denninghoff after the backstroke specialist sat out last year to treat an injury. Denninghoff will be sorely needed on a squad that lost a lot of its relay star power with the graduation of Samantha Tucker. At the 2013 NAAs, Denninghoff was in the top eight in both backstroke events and should find herself there again. Emma Ivory-Ganja is the top-scoring returner, tallying 33 points in diving. A win on the platform (she was second last year) and top-eight finishes on the springboards (13th and seventh in 2014) will go a long way in helping the Longhorns remain in the top 10 this year.

Strengths: backstroke, diving**Weaknesses:** butterfly, freestyle ❖

PICTURED > Sarah Henry, Texas A & M

PICTURED > Lia Neal, Stanford

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BACKSTROKERS TO WATCH AT NCAA D1 CHAMPIONSHIPS

A preview of the incredibly loaded women's backstroke events at the upcoming D1 Championships. Can an "unknown" make her way to the top?

Commentary by Jeff Commings

The backstroke events at for the women NCAA Division I championships are loaded with so much talent that it will be difficult for an unknown to find her way into the championship final. In the 100 back, Rachel Bootsma will be looking to regain the NCAA crown she won in 2013 while Courtney Bartholomew will be chasing her first title.

And then you have Elizabeth Pelton, Olivia Smoliga, Brooklynn Snodgrass and Clara Smiddy as established swimmers on the national scene who know what it takes to get into the top eight. It certainly doesn't look easy for the underdogs.

The 200 backstroke field is just as daunting. Snodgrass will be defending her title, while Pelton will be looking to lower her American record and earn another title after winning in 2013. And then there's Missy Franklin. The 200 back will be her final individual event as a collegiate athlete, and she will go down fighting. Franklin hasn't swum a short course yards 200 backstroke in about two years, so I'm not sure what's in store, but since it's Missy Franklin, expect fireworks.

Bartholomew and Smiddy will be in the hunt, as will Georgia freshman Kylie Stewart. At the NCSA junior nationals last March, Stewart swam a 1:49.85, which would have won last year's NAAs. With Pelton and Franklin in the race, Stewart will need to get under the barrier again to score high for the Bulldogs.

But there is a chance that more than one unknown could get into one or both of the backstroke finals. Here are three with the best chances:



Photo Courtesy: David Farr

LINNEA MACK - UCLA

With the exception of Bootsma, no one has better underwater kicking skills in the backstroke events than UCLA senior Linnea Mack. At the winter nationals last December, she was underwater to the 15-meter mark on nearly every length of the 100 back. If she leans heavily on her strength – and also swims well on top of the water – she could give the Bruins some big points.

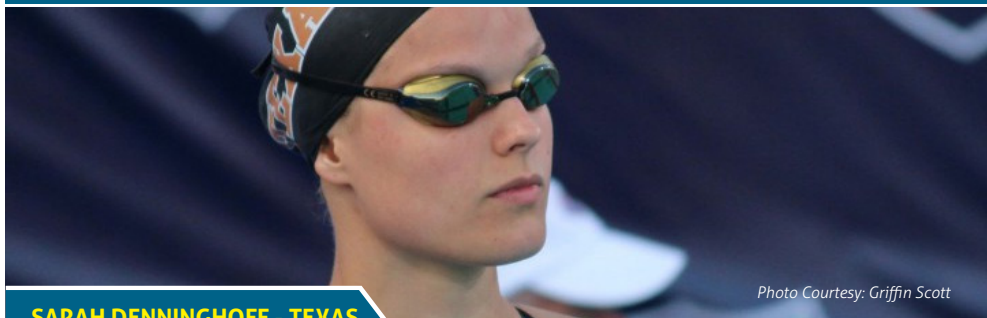


Photo Courtesy: Griffin Scott

SARAH DENNINGHOFF - TEXAS

Perhaps Denninghoff wouldn't be a major surprise if she makes it into the 100 and 200 backstroke finals, since she was eighth in the 200 back at the 2013 NAAs. But she redshirted last season to heal from injury, and in that year away, several new contenders have entered the fray. Denninghoff will be swimming the 200 freestyle and the 100 backstroke on the second day of the meet, and if she gets into the top eight in either or both, she'll have a tough day. But it could turn out to be one of the best of her career, if she doesn't lay back on the throttle in prelims.



Photo Courtesy: Ashley Landis

ANIKA APOSTALON - SDSU

I'm picking Apostalon as a dark horse championship finalist in the 100 back not only because she's seeded 15th, but because it would be a great story to see the San Diego State sophomore continue to shine a light on the rising team with another top-eight finish. She swam in the championship final of the 50 free last year, and it would be great for the Aztecs if she can replicate that and add the 100 back to her list of championship final swims. She was San Diego State's first championship finalist, and is likely inspiring her teammates to follow in her footsteps next season.

3 TEAMS TO WATCH IN WOMEN'S NCAA DIVISION 1 RELAYS

Commentary by Jeff Commings

Relays are the most exciting part of the NCAA championships, for fans, athletes and coaches. Double points are awarded for the top 16 teams in the five women NCAA Division I relays contested, and the school that takes home the team trophy at the end of the meet usually wins the majority of relays.

The California Golden Bears are slated to win the team championship in two weeks in Greensboro, and go into the meet as the top seed in three of the five relays. As I always say with the NCAA championships, anything can happen, but with the depth and strength California is displaying this season, nothing appears to stand in their way in terms of winning multiple relays.

California is not seeded first in the 400 free relay, with Stanford holding the top spot in that. The Cardinal is vulnerable with the

departure of Maddy Schaefer earlier this year. Schaefer's absence puts a major hole in that relay as well as the other freestyle relays, but this one hurts the most.

Virginia is the top seed in the 400 medley relay, and will rely heavily on Courtney Bartholomew on backstroke to give her teammates a lead. Bartholomew nearly broke Natalie Coughlin's American record in the 100 back in her leadoff for Virginia's 3:27.84 last December at the Georgia Invitational, and that momentum could be enough to give the Cavaliers a major win.

But California remains the big headliner of the relays on the road to a team title. Here are three others that could also make headlines with strong relay performances.



Wisconsin has never placed higher than fourth in the 200 free relay or 400 free relay at the women's NCAA championships, but that could change in two weeks. Led by star sprinter Ivy Martin, the Badgers could find themselves in the top three in both events. But what's the best strategy to make that happen? Does head coach Whitney Hite put Martin on the leadoff leg to give the next three some clean water, or save her for the anchor and give her the opportunity to make up some ground, and put up a faster relay split than she could on the first leg? Wisconsin is seeded fourth in both sprint free relays, and with Stanford losing a key swimmer, the chance to move up becomes a possibility.



Tennessee won the 200 medley relay and 400 medley relay at the 2013 championships in a bit of a surprise. Molly Hannis is closing out her collegiate career, and she could provide a boost to her squad with stellar breaststroke swims. The key will be backstroker Amanda Carner, who will need to have the swims of her life to stay in contact with such teams as Virginia and California. That could help bolster Hannis' confidence when she dives in for breaststroke, leaving butterflyer Harper Bruens and freestyler Faith Johnson to finish the race. Johnson has been an NCAA finalist in the sprint freestyles, and having a reliable anchor on your team means a lot when races are decided by hundredths of a second.



Indiana is not on the list of qualifiers for three of the five relays, giving the Hoosiers the opportunity to be a little fresher for the 400 free relay and 800 free relay. Indiana is seeded fourth in the 800 free relay, and though California might have the race wrapped up, the hunt for places two through eight are very much undecided. Ray Looze's women's team stepped up in a big way at the Big Ten championships to win the 800 free relay, and that attitude will need to be replicated at the NCAA meet. The four likely to swim the race – Haley Lips, Kennedy Goss, Grace Vertigans and Brooklyn Snodgrass – are very talented racers, and have the opportunity to swim two to three seconds faster in two weeks.

5

FRESHMEN TO WATCH IN THE BUTTERFLY EVENTS

Commentary by Jeff Commings

Being a freshman at the NCAA championships is a daunting ordeal. The meet has been called one of the toughest meets in the United States, and for good reason. You have to swim fast in every session if you want to not only get a second swim but set yourself up to score the most points for your team. That could be a scary thing for a first-timer, but five ladies could step up and perform well for their universities in two weeks in the butterfly events. Some of them are seeded in the top ten, while others are just outside but have a very good chance of scoring big points. Here's a look at their prospects for the women NCAA Division I butterfly races.



BERYL GASTALDELLO ▼



Gastaldello is only swimming one butterfly event at the NCAA championships, the 100 fly, but she's bound to make a big statement after already dropping some jaws last month at the Southeastern Conference championships. The Texas A&M Aggie from France became the sixth-fastest swimmer in history in the event with a 50.87, and though Kelsi Worrell and Kendyl Stewart have the pedigree to win the event, Gastaldello could be the spoiler. With this marking her first year racing in short course yards, she has amazing untapped potential that head coach Steve Bultman apparently saw in her during recruiting.

TEXAS A&M AGGIES

JANET HU ▼



Unlike Gastaldello, Hu is well-known in short course yards for her butterfly prowess. She owns the short course 200 butterfly 17-18 national age group record with a 1:52.92 from last March's NCSA junior nationals. If she approaches her best time in two weeks, she'll be in the hunt for a win. The 200 fly is fairly wide open this year, with Christina Bechtel of Kentucky holding the top seed with a 1:52.36 and Georgia's Hali Flickinger second at 1:52.88. Tanja Kylliainen of Louisville is also a major force in that race. As for the 100 fly, Hu also has the chops to contend. Though she's seeded 14th with a 51.93 – 1.8 seconds behind top seed Worrell – I think her sprint butterfly is on the verge of making big improvements under Greg Meehan's tutelage. It might be a tougher hill for Hu to climb in the 100 fly, but if she makes the top eight, it should give her major confidence the next day in the 200 fly.

STANFORD CARDINAL



◀ JASMINE MAU

A bit of research shows that a Hawaii native has yet to win an NCAA swimming title, so Mau is on the cusp of history if she can get herself among the contenders in either butterfly event. The California freshman has a better chance in the 100 fly, the event in which she is the former national public high school record holder with a 52.23. Mau was just off that lifetime best at the Pac 12 championships with a 52.26 and all she needs to do is break 52 seconds for a shot at her first major national championship final. It would be a big move up the rankings for Mau, who is seeded 20th in the 100 fly. But stranger things have happened at the NAAs, so don't count it out. Mau is seeded 15th in the 200 fly with a 1:55.53, and it would be a great finish to her freshman season if Mau can get into the championship final of both butterfly events.

CALIFORNIA GOLDEN BEARS

NOEMIE THOMAS ►

Thomas comes to her first NCAA championships off an impressive list of international accomplishments, including a seventh-place finish in the 100 fly at the 2013 world championships for Canada. She's a sprint specialist, owning the Canadian record in the short course meters 50 butterfly, but don't count her out in the 200 fly. She is seeded fifth in that event with a 1:54.10, well within striking distance of a national title. The potential is greater in the 100 fly, where she's seeded 13th with a 51.91 but could easily move into the top eight. It's likely that her performances at the Pac 12 meet representing California were not fully rested, and it would not be surprising if Thomas can crack 51 seconds and potentially give the 100 fly final three freshman competitors.



CALIFORNIA GOLDEN BEARS

COURTNEY WEAVER ►

Weaver could turn out to be a silent but deadly contributor to Georgia's point tally as the Bulldogs try to defend their team title. She's seeded 14th in the 200 fly (1:55.33) and 30th in the 100 fly (52.49), and has the potential to score in the consolation finals in both events. She posted lifetime bests in both events to get the invite to NAAs, and will need to shake off the nerves and swim fast in prelims to give herself the opportunity to become an All-American. Based on seeding, her best shot is in the 200 fly, but the 16th seed in the 100 fly is 51.98, just five tenths off her best. In swimming, that's a country mile, but when the adrenaline is pumping and your teammates are on the deck cheering you on, there's always that unexplained boost that gets you the result you need.



GEORGIA BULLDOGS

3 DARK HORSES IN THE WOMEN'S NCAA DIVISION 1 DISTANCE FREESTYLE RACES

Commentary by Jeff Commings

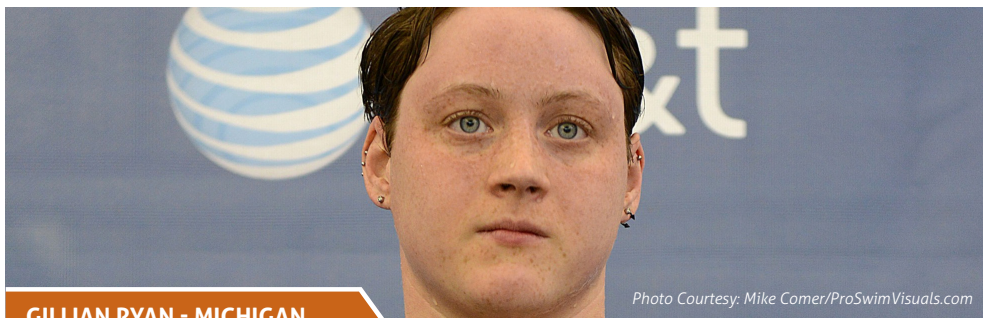
Once you look at the psych sheet for the women's NCAA Division I distance freestyle events, the first thought when glancing at the lineups is: "Cierra Runge is going to win two NCAA individual titles as a freshman."

That might turn out to be true for the California "Baby Bear," but look a few places below where Runge hangs out as the top seed and you will see Brittany MacLean, Georgia's reigning champion in the 500 and 1650 freestyles. MacLean won that 500 last year by inches over Missy Franklin, and until Runge broke MacLean's NCAA record last week, MacLean looked like a near certainty for another double.

But don't expect the distance freestyles to be a two-woman battle for the title. Any of the top 10 seeds in the 500 have chance if they can get into the championship final. I predict that as many as four swimmers will be under 4:33 in the final, and a possible sub-4:30 is in the works, but only if race strategies don't dictate a slow opening pace.

As for the 1650 freestyle, MacLean has more racing experience than Runge in this distance. Runge, who was pretty much a drop-dead sprinter three years ago, switched to distance freestyle while training with North Baltimore Aquatic Club 18 months ago. The result was a spot on the world championship team in the 400 free and silver in that event at the Pan Pacific championships. MacLean's accomplishments in the past year have improved as well since her NCAA titles, and she could be riding on that upswing. Don't let her fourth seed in the 500 and sixth seed in the mile fool you.

Besides Runge and MacLean, these three ladies could be extremely dangerous in the distance freestyle events in two weeks.



GILLIAN RYAN - MICHIGAN

Photo Courtesy: Mike Comer/ProSwimVisuals.com

Like Runge, Ryan is a freshman and has years of training at North Baltimore under her belt. But Ryan, having a great season at Michigan, has an advantage: distance freestyle has always been her forte. Though the 500 free could be viewed as a bit too short for Ryan, she continues to excel in it and will be dangerous as the race progresses. While Runge and others will likely push the pace early, Ryan could even-split or negative-split her races and land a surprise attack at the finish. Ryan has had a lot of success in the long course pool, placing third in the 800 and fourth in the 400 free at the 2012 Olympic Trials.



LEAH SMITH - VIRGINIA

Photo Courtesy: Griffin Scott

Smith, a sophomore, had a breakout summer season in 2014, earning a place on the Pan Pacific championships team as well as a spot on the 800 free relay for this year's worlds. Though initially deemed a distance swimmer, working on the "shorter" distances in the past year should pay off in two weeks. Smith has something to prove in the 500 after placing ninth in the event at last year's NAAs, and it's likely that she'll not only get into the final, but she will be in the thick of the race. Thanks to her newfound early speed and her traditional closing speed, Smith has the perfect balance to contend for the 500 free title.



Photo Courtesy: Mike Comer/ProSwimVisuals.com

JESSICA THIELMANN - FLORIDA

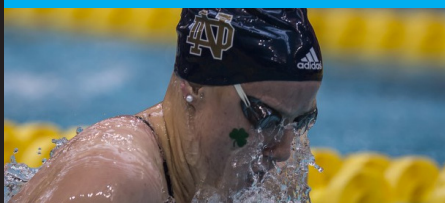
The Florida junior has been swimming very well this season, regularly posting some of the fastest in-season times in distance freestyle in dual meet action. Though she has never made a championship final in the 500 free (highest place: 10th in 2013), she comes into the meet seeded fifth with an opportunity to make a big leap forward. She already did that this season, dropping two seconds off her lifetime best to get the invite with a 4:36.62. The confidence that she will use to get into the final should carry over into the actual race, where her years of grueling training in Gregg Troy's program will pay off.

4 BREASTSTROKERS TO WATCH AT WOMEN'S NCAA DIVISION 1 CHAMPIONSHIPS

Commentary by Jeff Commings

Though the great Breeja Larson has moved on to postgraduate life, the breaststroke events will not be without some excitement in two weeks at the women's NCAA Division I championships. We could see an American record in the 200 breast and a close race in the 100 breast that could result in one or two ladies under the 58-second barrier. Here are four that should stand out:

EMMA REANEY - NOTRE DAME



Reaney took the spotlight off Larson last year in the 200 breast, setting the American record at the ACC championships last year with a 2:04.34, then lowering it at the NCAA championships with a 2:04.06. I shudder to think about the possibility of a woman posting a 2:03 in the 200-yard breaststroke, but the Notre Dame senior has the chops to make it happen. She's been lurking in the shadows this season, with a 2:07.69 as her best so far this season. She's bound to be ready to uncork something special in the 200, and will be a major force in the 100 as well.

MOLLY HANNIS - TENNESSEE



Hannis has evolved into a strong swimmer in both the 100 and 200 breaststrokes in the past year, and she could place in the top three in both in two weeks. Hannis is seeded first in the 100 breast and third in the 200, with her best opportunity for a win coming in the 100. Tennessee hasn't had an individual national champion since Christine Magnuson in 2008, and Hannis will be looking to end her collegiate career by making history for the Volunteers.

KIERRA SMITH - MINNESOTA



Smith poses the biggest threat to Reaney in the 200 breast. Smith's 2:05.16 is the top-seeded time going into the NCAA meet, and the Minnesota junior will likely use her back-half endurance to reel in Reaney in her quest to become Minnesota's third breaststroke national champion. Smith has chopped 1.5 seconds off her lifetime best in the 200, and another big drop would put her in the hunt for an upset.

LAURA SIMON - VIRGINIA



The Virginia sophomore had a career meet at the ACC championships, dropping two seconds off her lifetime best in both breaststroke events. She's now seeded in the top five in both at the NCAA championships, and the German could help Virginia in its quest for a top 10 team finish if she can advance in placings. The 100 breast field will be tightly packed, but if she can get under 2:06 in the 200 breast, she has a serious shot at a top-three finish there.

6 FACES OF SPRINT FREESTYLE IN WOMEN'S NCAA DIVISION I CHAMPIONSHIPS

Commentary by Jeff Commings

The races last about 21 seconds and 46 seconds, but the 50 and 100 freestyles at the women's Division I championships in two weeks will people taking for much longer than that. Could we have American records in both events?



Photo Courtesy: Griffin Scott

SIMONE MANUEL

Manuel will be on a mission in the 100 freestyle, aiming to get that American record back from Abbey Weitzeil after owning it for about two weeks in November. Manuel swam a 46.62 in late November to lower her own American mark as a Stanford freshman, but Weitzeil – now a high school senior – responded with a 46.29. What does Manuel have up her sleeve in two weeks? As for Lara Jackson's American record of 21.27 in the 50 free, that might not fall this year, but Manuel could get in the 21.4 range later this month.

Martin will be closing out her collegiate career, and is hungry for a national title. She's been on a roll since last summer, where she was second in the 50 free at the USA Swimming nationals and is swimming at the world championships this summer. If there is to be a spoiler to Manuel's potential sprint free double, Martin is it, and she would become Wisconsin's second female to win an NCAA swimming title.



Photo Courtesy: Griffin Scott

IVY MARTIN



Photo Courtesy: Peter H. Bick

Smoliga surprised everyone by winning the 50 free as a Georgia freshman last year. Now, it's up to her to prove the win wasn't a fluke. Her personal best 21.54 won't be enough to win, unless Manuel or Martin make a tactical error, but in a race where the tiniest mistake could cost you the race, Smoliga could find herself at the top of the podium with another lights-out swim.

OLIVIA SMOLIGA



Photo Courtesy: www.imagecommunications.ca

CHANTAL VAN LANDEGHEM

Swimming in lane one in the 50 free final at last summer's Pan Pacific championships, Van Landeghem won a bronze medal for Canada. That Pan Pac final also included Manuel and Martin, so Van Landeghem can use the confidence that she has beaten them before when the 50 free final starts in Greensboro. Van Landeghem can also impress in the 100 free, I expect her to find her way into the championship final.



Photo Courtesy: Jeff Commings

LIA NEAL

Neal is best in the 100 free, where she and Manuel can make it a Stanford 1-2 finish. Neal has been performing admirably under Greg Meehan's guidance, and that includes improvements in the 50 and 200 freestyles. Neal is seeded 19th in the 50 free, but has the experience of racing at the Olympics to keep her calm in the face of a daunting task of making the top eight. Neal took 10th in the 50 free last year, and doesn't want to find herself in the consolation final again.

FARIDA OSMAN

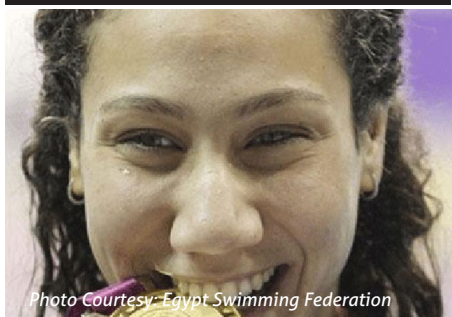


Photo Courtesy: Egypt Swimming Federation

The California sophomore has been on fire this season, winning a lot of her sprint freestyle races against some heavy competition, including nearly beating Manuel in the 50 free in a dual meet. Osman is primed to not only take a top-three finish in the 50 free, but is poised to score big in the 100 free. With Missy Franklin sitting out the 100 free this year, Osman will be the Golden Bears' biggest hopes in that event.

BREAKING DOWN IM RACES AT WOMEN'S NCAA DIVISION 1 CHAMPIONSHIPS

Commentary by Jeff Commings

The best thing about watching an individual medley race is seeing the lead change throughout the race. As swimmers play to their strengths and hope their weaknesses aren't their downfall, we tend to see some exciting strategy play out in the 200 and 400 IM. Thanks to the graduations of previous champions Maya DiRado and Elizabeth Beisel. Who has the chops to win? Here's a breakdown of how the 200 IM and 400 IM will shape up by stroke.



Photo Courtesy: Peter H. Bick

BUTTERFLY

The strongest butterflyer among the top six seeds in both IMs is Louisville's Tanja Kyliainen. She'll be a major player in the 200 fly final, and will play to her butterfly strengths, especially in the 200 IM where three backstrokers will be looking to chase her down (see "Backstroke" below). Look for Hali Flickinger of Georgia, seeded second in the 200 fly, to make a move early in the 400 IM. Celina Li is also a good butterflyer but tends to hold an even pace throughout the race. If she takes advantage of the butterfly in the 400 IM, it could put her in a good position for the rest of the race.



Photo Courtesy: Peter H. Bick

BACKSTROKE

Three of history's best backstrokers are the top three seeds in the 200 IM: Elizabeth Pelton, Missy Franklin and Courtney Bartholomew. Pelton nearly made the Olympic team in the 200 IM in 2012, while Franklin once owned the national independent high school record in the event. Bartholomew is not as accomplished as Pelton and Franklin in the 200 IM, but should be able to hang with them through the breaststroke. It'll be exciting to see which of the three has the fastest backstroke split. As for the 400 IM, Minnesota freshman Brooke Zeiger is the only notable backstroke. If she isn't too far behind after butterfly, expect her to surge into the lead on backstroke.



Photo Courtesy: Mike Comer

BREASTSTROKE

This is the stroke where the championship is often decided. Franklin and Pelton are not strong breaststrokers, but are fairly evenly matched in the other three strokes. The toughest of these two on the breaststroke leg will have the confidence going into free-style. Historically, Franklin is the better freestyler, but Pelton has been improving and could win if she has a lead of more than three tenths going into the final 50 of the 200 IM. The 400 IM features Madisyn Cox of Texas as the only breaststroker in the top six. She'll have to keep the leaders close through the first 200 yards in order to challenge in breaststroke. Zeiger has a good breaststroke as well.



Photo Courtesy: David Farr

FREESTYLE

The 400 IM has three strong distance freestylers in the top six. Sarah Henry of Texas A&M is a potential top-eight finisher in the 500 free, while Brooke Zeiger also has talent in that event and might score well in the 500 free. Flickinger is also in the 500 free and if she does not fall behind too far in the breaststroke, she will be tough on the end. In the 200 IM, the race going into freestyle will likely be between Franklin and Pelton, and it's a toss-up to choose the better swimmer here. It will be all about guts and determination in those final 50 yards.