

GCU Women's Swimming 2009-10

Only in a three-year-old swimming program would a sophomore be considered a veteran. Yet the description fits for Grand Canyon's Caiti Hoffman, whose early success symbolizes the direction in which the Antelopes are headed.

Hoffman, of Gilbert, became GCU's first-ever NCAA qualifier last season with her marks in the 100-meter backstroke, the 200 backstroke and the 200 individual medley. She was the Freshman of the Meet and Female Swimmer of the Meet at the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference championships, and she is a preseason all-conference selection for 2009-10. She holds school records in 10 events.

In other words, like the program itself, she's just getting warmed up.

"The difference in numbers is the main thing," says Coach Steve Schaffer, who's also in his second year. "Last year at the end, we had five girls, with three of them returning. Now we have 17."

With the program headed for full Division II funding of 8.1 scholarships in 2010-11, Schaffer is ramping up for sustained success. Led by Hoffman and transfer Alexis Glessner, the GCU women are strongest in the middle and long distances, although sophomore Brooke Bellah of Phoenix is the reigning RMAC champion in the 100 butterfly.

Glessner, who competes in everything from the 200 to the 1,650 freestyle, comes to GCU from Division I Northern Colorado, where she was a school record-holder in three events. She is a product of Red Mountain High School in Mesa and, with one year of eligibility remaining, already is at work on her MBA at GCU. Like Hoffman, she was selected to the preseason all-conference team. In the young season, she has set four school records.

Other prominent newcomers include Julie Redaway, a freshman breastroker from Belgium who originally signed with Northern Michigan and "kind of fell into our lap," Schaffer says. Redaway has set three GCU records in two meets. Freshmen Riley Smith of Phoenix and Karlee Grundeis of Bakersfield, Calif., have impressed the coach with their work ethic and "are tough as nails," he says.

It's adding up to a bright future, even if the Antelopes aren't quite ready to challenge Incarnate Word (San Antonio) and Minnesota State-Moorhead for conference supremacy in February.

"We're a couple of years away," Schaffer says. "But a year from now, we'll have a full recruiting class. It will be a huge jump.

"Some of it is luck, finding kids who fit and the ability you need. If you get good kids who will train and keep their grades up, then it's just a matter of helping them get faster."

And, he might have added, watching the records fall.