



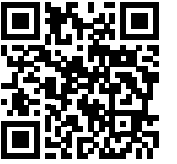
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# A fall to remember

## The 2011 EPHS fall sports season produced three state champions and an internationally great performance

By Ryan Williamson  
STAFF WRITER

Thinking about the fall of 2011, there isn't much to point to in regards to historical significance. A quick Google search points to one of the biggest stories of the fall being rumors of Kate Middleton, a member of the British Royal family, being pregnant.

Looking at the fall from a local perspective, however, that fall was one that was quite historic in nature for Eden Prairie. More specifically, Eden Prairie High School (EPHS) athletes accomplished quite a bit during that short amount of time.

In about a month, EPHS captured titles in boys' soccer, girls' volleyball and football. On top of that, Rachel Bootsma, a senior at the time, was making headlines on the international stage for her performance in the pool.

### Rachel Bootsma takes her talents international

In most cases, it'd be surprising and maybe disappointing to see a star athlete not compete for their school in their senior year. But for Rachel Bootsma, the reason for doing so was rational.



Rachel Bootsma signs her National Letter of Intent to swim at the University of California, Berkeley. But before swimming for the Bears, she would make her hometown of Eden Prairie proud with a gold medal at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

The Eden Prairie swimmer, whose best swim is the backstroke, decided against competing in high school swimming to do something different — compete for her country and possibly make the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

As a high school swimmer the year before, Bootsma set the national high school record for the 100-yard backstroke with a time of 51.53. That same year, she placed third in the 100-meter backstroke at the 2010 USA Swimming National Championships.

During the fall of 2011, Bootsma was traveling across the world, including to the Pan American Games in Guadalajara, Mexico. It's considered to be the second biggest interna-



An EPHS soccer player goes for a header against Eastview. The Eagles bested a previously unbeaten Lightning team 3-1.



The EP boys' soccer team celebrates at the Metrodome after capturing the 2011 Class 2A state championship with a 3-1 win over Eastview.

tional sporting event behind the Olympics.

Competing against some of the world's top swimmers, Bootsma won the 100-meter backstroke and broke the games' record with a time of 1:00:37.

The longtime swimmer was now getting closer to a spot at the Olympics. In June 2012, she finished second in the U.S. Olympic Trials in the backstroke to earn a spot.

In London, she failed to qualify for the 100-meter finals as an individual. However, she did swim the backstroke for Team USA's 4x100-meter medley relay in the preliminary rounds. Her effort helped Team USA to gold and earned the EPHS alumna a gold medal.

After swimming at the University of California-Berkeley, Bootsma has since moved on from swimming. She is married and has one child.



Senior running back Andrew Larson runs into the end zone for the game's lone score as EP defeated Wayzata 13-3 in the 2011 Prep Bowl.

### Boys' soccer stuns the state

Heading into the Class 2A state championship game, Eden Prairie was a heavy underdog to top-seeded and unbeaten Eastview. But by that point, this Eagles' squad was quite familiar with being taken for granted.

That started for EP in the Section 2AA tournament. The Eagles were the No. 3 in the section, with heavyweights such as Edina and Bloomington Jefferson ahead of them in the section's pecking order.

In the section semifinals, EP headed on the

road to face a tough Edina team and succeeded, winning 3-0. This win came after the Hornets had won both regular-season meetings.

The Eagles completed their section tournament mission three days later when EP upset top-seeded Bloomington Jefferson on the road to earn a spot in the state tournament.

Like section play, the Eagles found themselves the No. 3 seed in the Class 2A state tournament. Facing Blaine, EP rolled to a 4-1 victory. That win earned the Eagles a spot in the semifinals, facing Maple Grove, which had upset No. 2 seed North St. Paul.

As the two teams faced off in the Metrodome, the game went on without any scoring until late in the second half when EP's Abdul Omar scored twice just minutes apart, vaulting the Eagles into the state championship game.

Playing top-seeded Eastview, EP swung the momentum in its favor in the fourth minute when Medo Youssef scored to put the Eagles ahead 1-0.

EP held the Lightning in check for most of the championship match and even got up by three goals late in the second half. Eastview did score to make it 3-1 late in the second half, but it was too late as the Eagles won their second state title in school history and first since 2002.

### Volleyball wins it all in dramatic fashion

One thing that is certainly true about volleyball — it can be a roller coaster ride for all involved. Each point scored leaves one side elated with the other upset looking to get the point back. Those involved with EP's run to the 2011 state volleyball association certainly experienced quite a few emotions.

## Good times and first times

### Eden Prairie's 1970 football team celebrates the 50-year anniversary of its Minnesota Valley Conference championship

By Daniel Huss

The 16-, 17- and 18-year-old boys on the Eden Prairie High School football team weren't thinking about being their school's first-ever conference champions in 1970, but simply being conference champions.



Facing fourth-and-17, EP quarterback Paul Westerhouse hit Mike LaGrand, above, for a 20-yard touchdown. The play would lead to the EP football team's first-ever conference championship.

"I don't remember being first as being any part of the narrative at the banquet," said George Adzick, a sophomore receiver on the 1970 team. "It was never, now we're finally champions. It was just we are champions."



With his hands signaling touchdown, EP coach John Ryski celebrates his team's good fortune.

Eden Prairie High School fielded its first football team in 1958.

"That senior class included four boys," recalled Curt Connaughty, the program's first coach, "and two came out for football."



Friday night lights, circa 1970, featured afternoon sunshine. With helmets on, Eden Prairie's bench was at the ready.

"We started getting numbers in 1963 when Eden Prairie became a township," added Connaughty. "The big thing was getting the sewer."

In 1970, with John Ryski at the helm, Eden Prairie's football team featured some 41 players — 15 seniors, seven juniors and 19 sophomores.

Remember continues on page 3

Good times continues on page 2



# EP’s own Nina Huynh finds her way to the top of the podium

## The 15-year-old recently captured a figure skating state championship

By Ryan Williamson  
STAFF WRITER

Nearly six months after the Eden Prairie High School (EPHS) boys’ hockey team captured a state championship, another member of the Eden Prairie community has come home with some championship hardware.

The latest is 15-year-old Nina Huynh. A member of the Eden Prairie Figure Skating Club (EPFSC), Huynh captured the state championship in the open juvenile girls division state title in September.

Huynh won her state championship at the Bloomington Ice Garden, the home of this year’s Minnesota State Figure Skating Championships. Her division featured six other skaters. Huynh finished the competition with a score of 32.74, nearly one point better than the second-place finisher, Tatiana McKay of the Figure Skating Club of Bloomington.

“I’m so excited to have competed in the Minnesota State Figure Skating Championships with my Eden Prairie Figure Skating Club teammates,” Huynh said in a press release sent out by EPFSC. “I feel very accomplished to have won first place in my division.”

The three-day event in Bloomington resulted in 21 individual champions along with one team crown. It is hosted by the Twin City Figure Skating Association. Huynh was the only Eden Prairie native to take home a championship in this event.

Six other EPFSC members competed in the state championships, including Nina’s sister, Sachi Huynh. She finished 10th in the pre-junvenile girls competition. Other competitors included Bergen Papa, who finished third in the intermediate men’s combined division.

Nina Huynh is the first EPFSC member to win state in this division since Lauren Muench did so in 2010. The last EPFSC skater to win a state title before Huynh was Daniel Borisov, who won first place competing in the preliminary boys division. In its more than 35 years of operation, EPFSC has



Eden Prairie native Nina Huynh poses with her state championship plaque following her first-place finish in the open juvenile girls division.

helped skaters at all levels and produced 19 Minnesota State Figure Skating Championships first-place finishes.

This was Huynh’s third time competing in the state championships. Skating with her sisters, Huynh has been practicing the sport since she was 3 years old. Before this one, her most recent competition was the 2019 Northland Competition, where she took first place in the Pre-Juvenile Girls division.

Huynh’s win is one of the latest steps in her development as a figure skater, according to coach Rachel Nelson.

“Nina is a beautiful skater who is so elegant and graceful on the ice,” Nelson said. “She has such a great work ethic, and I’m so happy to see her get recognized as an elite skater.”

# Melissa Stockwell’s inspiring Paralympic journey

Since graduating from EPHS, Stockwell has found herself traveling across the world representing her country as a Paralympian

By Ryan Williamson  
STAFF WRITER

More than 200 Americans competed in this year’s Paralympic Games in Tokyo. When Team USA’s contingency of athletes walked in the Opening Ceremony, they were led by one athlete with a direct tie back to Eden Prairie.

Melissa Stockwell is a 1998 graduate of Eden Prairie High School (EPHS). Her life has changed significantly since she walked the halls of EPHS. She’s now a mother, a retired military soldier and a three-time Paralympian. Her latest appearance came at the Tokyo Games.



Melissa Stockwell. Photo by Team USA.

Following her time in Eden Prairie, Stockwell attended college at the University of Colorado Boulder. She spent four years in the Rocky Mountains graduating with a degree in communications while also serving in the school’s Army ROTC program.



Melissa Stockwell presents the torch at the 2012 Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., alongside former First Lady Michelle Obama. Photo courtesy of the USO.

She joined the Army and was deployed to Iraq in March 2004 as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Nearly a month after her deployment, Stockwell lost her left leg above the knee when a roadside bomb exploded.

Stockwell was taken to Walter Reed Army Medical Center for rehabilitation. Just 52 days after her injury, she began walking on a prosthetic leg. She retired from the Army a year after the accident and received a Bronze Star and Purple Heart for her service.

While rehabbing at Walter Reed, Stockwell

learned about Paralympic sports through a presentation by the United States Olympic Committee’s Paralympic Military and Veteran Program. The presentation inspired her to begin training to compete in swimming.

She moved back to Colorado in hopes of



EPHS alumna Melissa Stockwell speaks at a Paralympic Military Sports Camp in San Diego. Stockwell competed in the Paralympics following time served in the U.S. Army. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army.

qualifying for the 2008 Paralympic Games. Working with coach Jimi Flowers, Stockwell trained for a chance to qualify for Team USA. She was able to make the U.S. Paralympic Trials in April 2008.

Competing in the trials in Minneapolis, just minutes from where she graduated high school, Stockwell managed to swim well enough to make the U.S. Paralympic team. She was the first veteran of the Iraq War to qualify for the Paralympics.


In Beijing, Stockwell failed to qualify for the finals in each of the three events she competed in. However, she did have the honor of bearing the U.S. flag for Team USA at the closing ceremonies.

In 2009, Stockwell decided to change which sport she wanted to pursue at the highest level as she made the move to paratriathlon.

At the time, the sport was not part of the Paralympic program. However, she found success at other international championships. She won the ITU Paratriathlon World Championship in 2010 in Budapest. She went on to repeat as champion in 2011 and 2012.

Fortunately for Stockwell and other paratriathletes, the sport was added to the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro. She qualified in 2016 competing in the PTS2 classification, a division of the paratriathlon for athletes who use prosthetics.

To read the rest of this story, head to [eplocalnews.org](http://eplocalnews.org)



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## Good times from page 1

“We had three good classes in a row,” said Ryski. “We had good two-way players in our seniors, good linemen in our juniors and a good group of sophomores.”

And?

Eden Prairie lost an early Minnesota Valley Conference game that fall, losing to rival Shakopee.

Note: the Minnesota Valley Conference, circa 1970, included Buffalo, Chaska, Eden Prairie, Golden Valley, Orono, Shakopee, St. Anthony and Waconia.

“Our seniors weren’t going to have it,” said Adzick, of the Shakopee loss. “They were a determined group and that determination exceeded everything. It exceeded coaching, it exceeded desire, and in some cases, talent.”

“Their most revealing characteristics were grit and perseverance,” he added. “It’s an esoteric way of looking at it, but they created this vibe, something I’d never seen before.”

## Combinations

Ryski remembers that team and that team’s start/heart.

“The first few games were an experiment,” he said. “Once we made some decisions, we became pretty good.”

For what it’s worth, games were played in the afternoon, with no lights and no bleachers.

Fun fact: Minnesota Valley contests were broadcast live on a Shakopee radio station. Dick Jonckowski served as the announcer, former Minnesota Twin Jim Kaat the color commentator.

“Some of the fields were tipped,” said Ryski. “One side might be nice and dry, the other muck and mire.”

“A lot of our players played both ways,” he added. “Some never left the field.”

Sophomore Paul Westerhouse was the 1970 team’s starting quarterback. Adzick, who went on to become an All-Big 10 first team strong safety at the University of Minnesota, started at receiver. Adzick was also the kicker, Westerhouse the holder.

## Championship

The 1970 season was played before Minnesota held its first state championship football tournament in 1972. That meant winning a conference championship wasn’t just the next best thing, but the best thing.

Eden Prairie’s 1970 season came down to the final game. If Eden Prairie beat St. Anthony, Eden Prairie would win the Minnesota Valley Conference title. If St. Anthony beat Eden Prairie, the title would be shared, possibly, by three teams (Eden Prairie, Orono and St. Anthony).

To read the rest of this story, head to [eplocalnews.org](http://eplocalnews.org)



# EP trail treks to try through Thanksgiving

By Jeff Strate

Eden Prairie's hike and bike trails become embraced by spectacular autumn canvases each October. As October cedes to November and Thanksgiving, the blazes become less bold but more nuanced and informing — more interesting. Hidden ponds, creeks, neighborhoods and vistas re-appear as leaves fall.

We can drop "Prairie" from our town's name and just go with "Eden."

Every one of our neighborhoods is supplied with welcoming trails and walkways. The following small list of trails is not intended to be an arbitrary ranking; it is a reminder for the car-bound among us to take a hike or ride a bike and to bring a camera.

**Round Lake Park Loop and connector trail**

The southwest arc of Round Lake's mile-long loop trail can be a spiritual experience, sometimes necessarily shared with many others. Tall mature trees form a canopy over what



Nature photographer and former EP resident Doug Sandstad focuses his camera while author Kate Havelin talks about the swath of classic big woods in the Richard T. Anderson Conservation Area. Havelin led an October 2011 trail tour organized by Writers Rising Up, the group that led the initiative for the area's interpretive trail. File photo by Jeff Strate.

may be our most popular paved trail. A paved connector trail winds westward through a woodsy and cozy neighborhood between homes and gardens to the straight and steep approach to the Mitchell Marsh Loop with more backyard gardens and native landscapes.

**Staring Lake and Purgatory Park Loop trails**

These two loop trails and their connector trail along Purgatory Creek accommodate cyclists and walkers. The 2.5-mile Purgatory Creek Park loop meanders through wetlands, willows and cottonwoods, edging a shallow lake with eagles and wading birds. The impressive span of the new Southwest Light Rail bridge and the Eden Prairie Veterans Memorial can be seen from the Jean L. Harris Gathering Bridge.

Our most cosmopolitan park ironically channels the Florida Everglades ... before Jack Frost blows in from Canada.

The full spectrum of fall colors, however, is most impressive along the connector trail (.2-mile) and the Staring Lake loop (2.4 miles). This scenic, alternately forested and lakeshore loop is long enough to remind the legs, heart and spirit what the good life is really about.

**R.T. Anderson Conservation Area**

This bluff country preserve on Flying Cloud Drive features the Elizabeth Fries Ellet Interpretive Trail. The trail features informative markers and a very steep stretch to a bluff-top prairie with panoramic views of the Minnesota Valley. Other easier to hike, forested trails



This scarecrow smiled broadly on the Birch Island Woods trail a few Octobers ago. Imagined image by Jeff Strate.

pass through stands of basswood, maple and oak. Look for segmented snake grass where cold artesian seeps irrigate a glen or two.

**Edenvale Boulevard Trail/Regional Trail Loop**

A popular, unofficial bike, hike and leashed-dog walking loop in north-central Eden Prairie is formed by the Edenvale Boulevard Trail and the Minnesota River Bluffs Regional Trail. The woodsy stretches of the Edenvale trail sport curvy, fun-on-a-bike, ups and downs and muscle stretching hills.

The trail also passes by lovely cul-de-sacs and streets that will lead you to, without a time machine, suburban America as we knew it in the 1970s.

The Edenvale Trail connects to the level, crushed limestone, regional trail near Birch Island Woods to the northeast and the Valley View Road access trail to the southwest.

The loop ranges from 2.7 miles to 3.3 miles depending on your whims. Both trails will be flush with autumn colors and smiles. So, too, will each of Eden Prairie's neighborhoods.



October hikers in Richard T. Anderson Conservation Area. File photo by Jeff Strate.

*Editor's Notes:*

*The City of Eden Prairie website has much more trail information. Use keywords City, Eden Prairie or trails parks in your search.*

*Check out Jeff's previous takes on other Eden Prairie Trails in the Outdoors section of the Eden Prairie Local News website.*

*Contributing writer Jeff Strate serves on the EPLN Board of Directors.*

**Remember from page 1**

With one of the top hitters in the state, Sarah Wilhite, leading the way, the Eagles looked like they may have a shot at the school's first state championship.

However, that was tested early in postseason play as EP had to claw its way past Hopkins in the section semifinals. The match went five sets, with the Eagles winning the final two sets, including the deciding fifth set, 16-14.

Things were not quite as difficult for EP in the section final against another conference rival in Wayzata. The Eagles captured the section title in four sets against the Trojans, sending EP to the state tournament for the second time in state history and first since 2004.

As the No. 4 seed in the Class 3A state tournament, EP got things going in a positive direction with a four-set win against Owatonna. Then, the Eagles got a gift when top-seeded Blaine was upset in the quarterfinals by Hutchinson.

The Tigers' potential upset run was stopped quickly when EP swept Hutchinson. This meant the Eagles were one win away from their first state championship.

Standing in EP's way was second-seeded Lakeville North, a perennial power in volleyball with plenty of hitters to match the power of Wilhite.

The match, which took place at Xcel Energy Center, was one for the memory books. It went five sets, with the match being tied 32 times and the lead changing hands 14 times. Wilhite led Eden Prairie with 33 kills in the match.

The fifth set was a barn burner, with there being nine match points. Eventually, EP emerged victorious with a 22-20 win in the fifth set.

"It was hard keeping the negative thoughts from getting into my head," Wilhite told the *Eden Prairie News* at the time. "But I believed in my teammates."

Following her time at EPHS, Wilhite became one of the nation's top volleyball players while at the University of Minnesota, being named the Div. I National Player of the Year in 2016. She competed for Team USA at the 2018 World Championships.

**Football**

It's hard to believe now, but in the fall of 2011, there was talk in the high school football world that Wayzata had supplanted Eden Prairie as the state's top football program.

At the time, the Eagles had gone four years without a state championship, a lifetime in the Mike Grant era of EP football. Meanwhile, the Trojans had become one of the state's best programs and bested the Eagles in the teams' regular-season meeting.

That idea would be put to the test the day after Thanksgiving in 2011 as the Lake Conference rivals faced off in the Class 5A state championship game at the Metrodome.

Much like the first matchup, points were at

a premium. The Eagles led thanks to the leg of kicker Jacob Ibach, who punched through two field goals.

The game stood at 6-3 heading into the fourth quarter. After EP forced a turnover, the Eagles pulled out a reverse flea-flicker. Quarterback Grant Schaeffer found running back Jake Woodring for a big gain.

A few plays later, standout running back Andrew Larson ran the ball in from 10 yards out to give EP a commanding 13-3 lead. The score stayed the same the rest of the way, and EP was back on top of the Minnesota high school football world.

The state championship in 2011 was the start of the best run in EPHS football history. The Eagles captured titles in 2012, 2013 and 2014 before being denied a fifth consecutive state title.



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# Getting to know EPHS athletics' new leading man

## Sitting down with Russ Reetz, the man taking over for Mike Grant as the head of the EPHS athletics department

By Ryan Williamson  
STAFF WRITER

During the second half of the 2020-21 school year, the Eden Prairie High School (EPHS) athletics department was not only dealing with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic but also with a new leader.

In January, longtime athletics director and current football coach Mike Grant left his post leading the activities at EPHS but stayed in his role with the football team. His departure meant the school was looking for an athletic director for the first time in nearly 20 years.

After a search, the school eventually landed on Russ Reetz, who was Prior Lake's athletics director at the time. Reetz was brought into Eden Prairie as associate principal of student activities and now leads one of the state's largest athletics departments.

Reetz is now nine months into his new role with the school and is in his first full school year taking over for Grant. *Eden Prairie Local News* recently caught up with Reetz to discuss the department and how things have gone for him thus far.

**EPLN: What has this experience been like taking over the athletics department?**

**Reetz:** It's been a lot to learn. We have more programs than any other high school in Minnesota. I'm getting to know the less common programs like colorguard, winterguard and ping pong. I would say it's a lot of learning a new system and meeting new people. I've really enjoyed it.

**EPLN: What made you want to take this job?**

**Reetz:** I really wanted to work with a more diverse student population. I wanted to grow in different areas of administration. I have more roles as associate principal with building operations, academics and more. Really, it was just a new student demographic, a larger support staff, and the reputation of Eden Prairie.

**EPLN: How is this department different from the one you were at previously (Prior Lake)?**

**Reetz:** I think the size and scope of our

programming. There's the need to communicate more. I've had to really force myself to be more organized. A lot of jobs I've worked in the past, you react to what's happening. We're very proactive and think three to four weeks ahead and communicate well. We want everyone having equal access and figuring out what's the best way to get information to our students and parents. We want to get boosters involved. It's a lot more involved here with the size and scope of the department.

**EPLN: What are some things you've done at previous stops that you'd like to bring here?**

**Reetz:** I had a lot of experience in technology. I've been a tech integrationist, working on educational technology. I've brought a lot of skills here, and it shows up with different things like with video board, streaming, using Google Drive, the online ticketing system and website. That's served me very well. When you have strong technical systems in place, you can spend more time on relationships and working well with students. We've done leadership training with captains, more with the student section and being more organized with the student council. Those are the kind of things I kind of brought with me from previous stops and enhance what we're doing here.

**EPLN: What has it been like to take over for a guy like Mike Grant while also still working with him?**

**Reetz:** It's really been great, and it's because Mike still thinks like an AD. I've never had a coach who thinks like an AD thinks. He thinks

about academic progress, attendance, behavior in school and communication with me with what's happening, even officials and transportation. He thinks like I do. He's been great to lean on and work with. He's around quite a bit. He has history that the rest of us don't have. I've leaned on him quite a bit for context, how it has always been done in the past and what we can do to improve it. He's been really good to work with.

**EPLN: How has the experience been impacted by COVID?**

**Reetz:** There were two things that made this uber challenging: coming in the middle of the year. There was no buildup to the start of something where you get yourself acquainted with the system. I came in, and it was full speed ahead right away. The majority of my time dealt with contact tracing, screening, rescheduling. It was maybe the most difficult task in my administrative career. Now, having the summer to get systems in place and find where my time can best be spent, I'm more on stable ground. It's not as much of COVID work, but it still lingers in the background. I'm still thinking about how we can mitigate COVID both in our

stands and on our field. Life is feeling more back to normal, more so since February.

**EPLN: What are some of the goals you have for the department?**

**Reetz:** I feel very strongly that the experience in this school belongs to the student audience. Every day we find

ways for kids to get involved and feel connected to the school. For our staff, a goal of ours is 85 percent participation in any program. It could be a fine arts program or an independent provider. We're trying to find ways for students to feel a sense of belonging here. That's my number one goal. We're trying to improve communication, be transparent in decisions and make it easier for the community to buy a ticket, see a game. We look for things we can do better. Really, it's in an effort to make everybody feel a sense of pride in EPHS. (It) could be grandma or grandpa, a community member who doesn't have a kid here. We want a positive experience. We lost a lot during the pandemic, so we're charged with putting the pieces back together.

## The 2021 Fall sports season, in photos

As high school sports return to some sense of normalcy, hundreds of athletes are participating in fall sports and activities sponsored by EPHS. On any given day, passersby of the high school can see anything from soccer practice to band rehearsal and so much more.

During this fall season, a number of photographers have been out and about capturing the moments of the fall season. Here are some of the photos we collected.



Girls Soccer

Senior Maya Moorjani kicks the ball during the EP girls' soccer match against Buffalo on Sept. 20. The Eagles won 2-0 to pick up their second conference win of the season as the Eagles compete in one of the state's toughest conferences.

Photo Credit: Rick Olson.



Football

Eden Prairie's Nick Fazi carries the ball during the Eagles' 13-3 win against Rosemount on Sept. 24. EP's defense shut down the Irish a week after falling to Lakeville South 42-7 on the road.

Photo Credit: Rick Olson.



Girls' swim and dive

The EPHS girls' swim team once again faces significant challenges going up against tough Lake Conference foes such as Minnetonka, Wayzata and Edina. The Eagles have their share of strong swimmers including Caroline Larsen, who broke a school record in the first meet of the season.

Photo courtesy of Kelly Boston.

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