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Goodbye, Nationals

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Goodbye, nationals



COVID-19 dashes three Wildcats' NCAA dreams

By Avi Mehta

When track athlete Keaton Wood '20 and swimmers Noah Cutting '20 and Neirton Oliveira '20 began training for their respective 2019-20 seasons, the seniors' goal was pretty simple: to represent Linfield at the NCAA Championships. All three had earned qualifying marks to punch their tickets to North Carolina for the national competition in March. But then came the coronavirus pandemic.

Wood was already practicing for the heptathlon at the NCAA Division III Indoor Track & Field National Championships in Winston-Salem, N.C., only to find out on March 12 — the day before his meet — that the event had been canceled.

Still in McMinnville, Cutting and Oliveira were going through their final practices in preparation for the NCAA swimming and diving championships in Greensboro, which they expected to start on March 18.

The road to North Carolina

Wood had started training for track late — just two weeks before the Wildcats' first indoor competition — because he was rehabbing from a football-season knee injury. The Lake Oswego native then had to wait until the last second to find out if he qualified for the national meet.



Neirton Oliveira '20 takes flight at the 2020 Northwest Conference Championships. He claimed the 800-meter freestyle relay, 200-meter individual medley, 100-meter butterfly and 400-meter freestyle relay at the event.

“I did not originally think my score would get in,” he said. “But it did, so we wanted to make the most of the opportunity.” After recovering from his injury and getting in track shape, Wood thought he would peak at the right time for the championships.

Noah Cutting '20 and Neirton Oliveira '20 embrace at the 2020 Northwest Conference Championships after finding out they qualified for the NCAA National Championships.



In contrast, the swimmers had spent countless hours in the pool preparing for nationals. Cutting was slated to participate in the 100-yard butterfly, 200 butterfly and 100 freestyle. Oliveira was going to swim in the 100-yard butterfly, 100 backstroke and 100 freestyle.

“Me and Neirton were so dedicated, committed and ‘all-in,’ as far as trying to do everything right for our bodies, and gearing up and getting ready,” said Cutting. “If it meant doing multiple practices or specialized stuff, getting every aspect of our race ready, we were down for that. There was no doubt in our minds. We were just going to do what we thought was necessary.”

Best friends, the two ‘Cats were eager to compete together. For Cutting, a three-time NCAA qualifier, having Oliveira along with him was a bonus.

“We were ready to go mentally — especially since this was the first year another male swimmer qualified for an individual event with me, let alone my best friend,” said Cutting. “That made it way easier for me to be ready mentally than years before.”

‘Bad news’

Thursdays at the track national championships are traditionally the time when athletes go through their final run-throughs before an NCAA-hosted evening banquet. This year’s banquet was abruptly canceled, yet the athletes were allowed to keep practicing.

After finishing his last tune-up, Wood headed to his hotel room. Coach Travis Olson, who accompanied Wood to North Carolina, had received an email announcing that no spectators would be allowed at the meet, but the competition would go on as scheduled.

Relieved, Wood relaxed in his room. But while scrolling through Twitter, he came across a statement from NCAA President Mark Emmert. It said all winter and spring NCAA events had been canceled.

“I walked into Travis’ room to ask him if this was true,” Wood said. “He made some phone calls to confirm. We were in disbelief, but started booking our flights home.”

Meanwhile at Linfield, the two swimmers were still a week away from competing. Cutting was in class when he received a two-word text message from coach Kyle Kimball, who’d tried calling first.



Noah Cutting ‘20 swims at the Linfield Aquatic Center. He has been named an All-American three times in his career.

“I didn’t pick up,” said Cutting. “He texted me ‘bad news’ and that is all I needed to know. Anything else, like no spectators allowed, would have been fine. Nothing would have been bad news for us other than that we could not swim again.”

Oliveira was also studying when he found out. “Coach called me, and I knew what he was going to say. It shattered me.”

The news turned out to be an abrupt — and final — end to the duo’s swimming careers. After some discussion, the NCAA refused to grant additional eligibility to winter sports student-athletes whose seasons were cut short. Both Cutting, who hails from Salem, and Oliveira, who is from Fortaleza, Brazil, said they wouldn’t have returned, anyway.

“This might have affected us personally, but one of the biggest things I saw this season was we had a team that was just as strong without the two of us,” said Cutting.

Wood has a different perspective. A three-sport athlete in football, indoor and outdoor track, he’s raring to go with another season of track eligibility remaining.

But first, he plans to get his knee back to 100%. “After that, I’m going to treat my training as if I am still in season, just maybe not as intense,” he said.

Keaton Wood ‘20 prepares for the hurdles at Maxwell Field. He has qualified for the NCAA Track & Field Championships each of the three seasons he competed.