Men's Swimming Scratches Five-Year Itch
By Brian J. S. Miller and Garth

Kalamazoo College's men's swimming team completed their 1996 championship campaign last weekend, winning their first (Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association) MIAA Championship in six years. The Hornets went undefeated during the dual meet season (12-0 overall, 4-0 in the MIAA) and won the MIAA Championship Meet with a score of 679 points.

The Flying Dutchmen of Hope College, last year's runner-up at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championship, finished second in the final league standings with a 3-1 MIAA record and 527.5 points at the Championship meet, followed by Calvin (2-2, 288.5 pts.), Albion (0-4, 237), and Alma (1-3, 193). Last year, Hope won the league championship with 677 points (5-0 in the MIAA), while Kalamazoo took second place with 582 points (4-1).

This year's championship is number 18 for Kalamazoo, all of which were won under head coach Robert Kent. The Flying Dutchmen have won seven MIAA titles and Albion has garnered one.

"I am amazed by the chemistry that this team has demonstrated," said Kent. "Our senior leadership was the best I have ever coached, and our freshmen were able to gel well with the upperclassmen."

"This team was unique in that every single person stepped up," said team captain Aaron Portenga, K'96. "Every swimmer and every diver had a chance to do something great, and each one did."

According to the other captains, Brian Miller, K'96, and Greg Racznia, K'96, "We experienced outstanding performances in each event." The strength of the Hornets' attack was no doubt this ability to perform well in every event, without letting up.

"When you have your foot on your enemy's throat, you don't let them up for air," said Portenga, explaining Kalamazoo's strategy. "As captains, we are very proud of our team, and their ability to come up big heat after heat, day after day."

Portenga, an All-American, Academic All-American, and school record-holder (200-yard freestyle relay), swam the crucial anchor leg of the national qualifying 200-yard freestyle, 400-yard medley (MIAA Champions) and the 200-yard medley relays. Following the loss of school record holder Paul Blowers, K'95, Portenga was asked to fill some very large shoes as the anchor of the Hornets' relays, a job about which Kent has said, "he has really worked hard to meet our needs, and he has done a wonderful job of doing much more than that."

The responsibility of leading a young sprint corps into the traditionally Hope-dominated events was also given to Portenga, as he emerged as the leader of the sprinters last fall. Portenga rose to this challenge as well, taking second place in the 50-yard freestyle, and fourth in the 100-yard freestyle to break up the Flying Dutchmen's barrage in both events.

Brian Miller, K'96 came into the meet as a three-time MIAA Champion in the breaststroke events, as well as the meet, pool, and school record-holder in the 100-yard and 200-yard breaststroke. Miller, an All-American who has qualified for the NCAA Championships for the fourth straight year, was seeded first in both breaststroke events, and tenth in the 200-yard individual medley (I.M.).

Miller once again had an outstanding MIAA Championship meet, as he dominated the breaststroke events, finishing well ahead of the field in both races, including a lifetime best time (2:05.24) in the 200-yard breaststroke, downing three records in the process. He also swam the breaststroke leg of the 400 yard medley relay, which captured the MIAA Championship in that event.

Miller's career-long attitude of "lead by example" was captured not only by his performance in the breaststrokes, but also in the 200-yard IM, where he moved from a tenth-place seed, to a league finalist.
After third-place finishes in both breaststroke events at the NCAA Championships, Miller's self-stated goal is "to be a national champion" this year.

Raczniai, the most versatile swimmer on the team and an All-American, has been a leader for four years, qualifying for the national championships each year and is working to earn the distinction of Academic All-American for his fourth straight year. Fellow captain Brian Miller gave Raczniai, a league champion in the 400-yard IM, what is perhaps the best compliment a teammate can give, saying, "Greg is the hardest worker I have ever swam with in ten years of swimming."

A school record-holder in the 200-, 400-, and 800-yard freestyle relays, Raczniai has been a thorn in the 50-yard and 200-yard freestyles. Fritz also swam to a lifetime best in his favorite event, the 100-yard freestyle, finishing just ahead of Dwight Benner, K'96, to end his swimming career on a high point.

Erik Cabbie, K'96, pulled off an astounding upset of the Flying Dutchmen's Mike Robbert in the three-meter competition, to take second place in that event. Cabbie's three-meter score of 433.02 was just seven points short of the NCAA qualifying standard.

Cabbie took third in the one-meter competition, behind Robbert and teammate Garth Miller, K'97. According to Miller, "Eric has worked very hard, paying his dues year after year, and that is what has made him the elite diver that he is today."

Miller, Kalamazoo's top diver this year, follows in the footsteps of a host of Kalamazoo All-American divers. Miller, the school 11-dive record holder for both boards, entered the championships as a third-year national qualifier on both the one meter and three meter boards, and hopes to equal the accomplishments of his predecessors.

Miller won both boards, outsorcing Robbert by 20 points on 1-meter, and Cabbie by a scant 2 points on 3-meter. In regard to Miller's greatest season yet, alumnus diver Matthew Swirtz, K'93, said, "Garth has tremendous talent, and if he dives to his potential at nationals, he will return home an All-American."

Entering the meet as an All-American and three-time NCAA qualifier, Chuck Kemeny, K'97, produced a lifetime-best performance in the breaststroke leg of the national-qualifying 200-yard medley relay. Kemeny's unmatched sprinting ability will put him in competition for the fastest breaststroke split at the NCAA Championships this year.

Tony "Juice" Michaels, K'97, was a league finalist in three events. Like Raczniai, his versatility and training habits are unmatched amongst his counterparts throughout the league.

Scott Jablonski, K'97, shocked the league with his performance in the 100-yard breaststroke, turning in a time of 1:02.69, which made him a league finalist for the first time. Jablonski also qualified tenth in the 50-yard freestyle, scoring valuable points in the league's deepest event.

A four-time All-American and a league champion, Brett Robbins, has qualified for the NCAA Championships in both of his years as a Hornet. Robbins is the school record-holder in both of the
medley relays as well as the 100-yard backstroke, a record which he improved at the league championships.

Last year, Robbins was the most valuable rookie, and this year he was just as valuable to the cause, finishing first in four events (the 100- and 200-yard butterflies, the 400-yard medley, and the 800-yard freestyle relay) and second in three events. Assistant Coach Brad Shively said, "If I had to start a team with just one person, I would pick Brett Robbins before anyone else in the entire MIAA."

Mark Hannum, K'98, swam what was undoubtedly the best meet of his career at Kalamazoo. Hannum had a fifth place finish in the 100-yard freestyle, an impressive seventh place in the 200-yard freestyle, and an eighth place in the 50-yard freestyle, which established him as one of the top Hornet sprinters.

In Hannum's finest moment, he swam the anchor leg of the 800-yard freestyle relay (MIAA Champions), holding off Hope's Shawn "Barno" Kinser to end a near decade-long Kalamazoo dry-spell in that event. Hannum will make his first appearance at the national championships this March as a member of the 200- and 800-yard freestyle relays.

Matt Sheeran, K'98, came to his second league championship meet as a top contender in both the backstroke and butterfly. In the backstroke events, Sheeran stayed up with some of the nation's best, proving why he will be a contender for years to come.

In the 200-yard butterfly, Sheeran finished in the top six to give the Hornets three of the six finalists in that event. Kalamazoo's unquestionable domination of the backstroke and butterfly events was largely due to Matt Sheeran's tireless performances on the final day of the meet.

Behind the force of three lifetime best times, Jon "The Sheriff" Sander, K'98, had what will go down as one of the highlights of his swimming career. In the 200-yard IM, Sander finished seventh, winning his heat by over two seconds and helping the Hornets to control five of the top seven places in that event.

Sander also finished fourth in the painstaking 400-yard IM, again contributing to Kalamazoo's control of five of the top seven places. Sander proved his versatility by finishing seventh in the 200-yard butterfly.

Steve "State Champ" Tisch, K'98, was an All-American last year, and holds the school record for both medley relays. This year, Tisch once again proved why he was one of the Hornet's top freshmen a year ago.

After a slipped start in the 100-yard backstroke preliminaries, Tisch rebounded to win his heat at night to place seventh, just minutes after an impressive seventh place finish in the 100-yard butterfly. Tisch then returned to score even more points for Kalamazoo on Saturday finishing sixth in the 200-yard backstroke.

Byron Brown, K'98, finished fourth in both diving events rounding out the impressive Hornet diving trio and solidifying his place among the MIAA's elite. With an impressive repertoire of dives, Brown shows the qualities that make Kalamazoo divers the strongest in the league.

Jussi Thomas, K'98, had impressive swims in some of the meet's most difficult events. In the 50 freestyle, Thomas finished in the top 12 for the first time, proving that he has the talent to swim in the MIAA's deepest event.

In his other events, the 100- and 200-yard butterfly, Thomas proved his versatility, scoring valuable points in both events. Thomas' qualifying performance in the 200-yard butterfly was tremendous in the preliminaries, despite loosing his goggles at the start of the race.

John "Voltron" Latham, K'99, a candidate for swimmer-of-the-meet, won three individual events in what may have been the finest rookie performance in MIAA Championship history. Latham proved that he is unequaled in the 200- and 400-yard individual medleys, swimming to NCAA qualifying times in both and breaking the school record in the latter.
In winning the 200-yard backstroke, Latham proved his trademark unwillingness to lose by upsetting Nykamp, the two-time league champion in that event, and Lubbers, the four-time 100-yard backstroke champion. Latham came from behind for an amazing win in the last five yards of the race.

Latham's meet did not end with his individual performances, as he proved in both the 200- and 400- yard (MIAA Champions) medley relays, as well as the 400- and 800- yard (MIAA Champions) freestyle relays why he will be a leader for years to come. As a member of the large Hornet national team this year, Latham has a chance to turn heads around the nation as well as here in West Michigan.

At the beginning of the season, not a single swimmer on the Hornet team would have predicted that the title "Fastest Man in the MIAA" would belong to a rookie from Kalamazoo. Garret "The Owner" Olson, K'99, waited until his final 50-yard swim of the weekend to claim the title (and qualify for the national championships) with his time of 21.24, ahead of Derek VanderHeide of Hope (21.31), the Hornets' Portenga (21.34), and the Flying Dutchmen's Bob "The Boss" Springsteen (21.40).

In Olson's other events, he managed to post the top Kalamazoo time of the season in the 100-yard freestyle (47.82), lead off a national qualifying 200-yard freestyle relay and score valuable points in the 100-yard backstroke. Olson's entire meet was summed up by an anonymous swimmer from Hope who simply asked, "Who was that guy?"

Aaron "Slapper" Ford, K'99, managed to turn heads throughout the entire MIAA, becoming the highest-placing rookie (fourth) in the 100-yard butterfly. Ford also finished fifth in the 200-yard butterfly, and lifetime best times in both events.

J.J. "Gigi" Wilner, K'99, proved to be one of the most surprising success stories of the entire weekend for the Hornet faithful, dropping nearly 20 seconds in the 500-yard freestyle to finish as the lone scorer for Kalamazoo in the grueling event. In Wilner's other spotlight event, the 1650-yard freestyle, he finished fifth in a lifetime best time of 17:36.65, nearly 20 seconds ahead of the sixth place finisher.

Mike "Boris" Tsipurski, K'99, swam both the breaststroke events for Kalamazoo, dropping considerable time. His contributions to the team will be expected to continue next year as Kalamazoo graduates two breaststroking seniors, Miller and Raczniak.

The Hornets victory was achieved through the unification of many members becoming one powerful body. After the meet, Kent said, "As I get older, I realize more and more that it's not about the destination - it's about the journey... and what an incredible journey this has been."