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Phil Anastasia: Fall sports dominated



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The air was turning cool.

The leaves were changing color.

And the action was at its highest level in South Jersey sports.

Fall sports squads dominate the final Super Seven of the school year, a ranking of the best teams in South Jersey sports, regardless of sport or season.

That's not to say there weren't top teams in the winter and spring. But the strength of this school year was a concentration of top teams in fall sports.

Here's the final Super Seven:

1. Eastern field hockey (26-2). The Vikings went 26-0 against New Jersey competition and won their 11th consecutive Group 4 state title. They also won their third Tournament of Champions title in the last four years.

Coach Danyle Heilig's team is a remarkable 57-1 in state-tournament play since 1999, and 255-2-5 against New Jersey opponents since 1999. But this isn't a decade-achievement award. This is an acknowledgment of the Vikings' dominating play in November, when they rolled to another state title and T of C crown.

This was a team with seven fully-committed seniors, led by Iowa-bound forward Kelsey Mitchell, the state's all-time leading scorer, and North Carolina-bound defender Melanie Dawson, last daughter from the first family of Eastern field hockey.

2. Haddonfield girls' tennis (32-0). If anything, Haddonfield was even more dominating than

Eastern against South Jersey competition. The Bulldogs won every match against a South Jersey foe by a 5-0 score.

But the best thing about Coach Jeff Holman's young team was the way the Bulldogs rose to the challenge after winning the Group 2 state title and entering the Tournament of Champions. Without a senior in the lineup, Haddonfield defeated Group 3 state champion Millburn and Group 4 champion Westfield by 3-2 scores.

The Bulldogs, who will be the state's team to beat again in September, were led last fall by freshman No. 1 singles Taylor Ng, junior No. 2 singles Meghan Burns and junior No. 3 singles Spencer Ng.

3. Camden Catholic boys' basketball (29-2). The Irish were remarkably consistent and proficient during an seemingly endless season that began with the first official practice Nov. 27 and stretched to the Tournament of Champions final March 23. That's 116 days.

Coach Jim Crawford's team featured five senior starters, led by Lehigh-bound shooting guard Anthony D'Orazio, the South Jersey player of the year, as well as forward Gerry Wixted. The other starters were forwards Tim Crawford and Sherard Cadogan, a football star heading to Wisconsin, and point guard Bart Middleman.

Before a 53-39 loss to Trenton Catholic in the T of C finals, Camden Catholic's only loss was in double overtime to a Cherokee team that won the Group 4 state final and advanced to face the Irish again in the T of C semifinals. In the rematch, Camden Catholic scored a 47-34 victory.

The Irish appeared impervious to pressure. In one three-week stretch in the regular season, they won four games in overtime. In state tournament play, they beat St. Joseph of Metuchen by three and St. Peter's Prep by five.

4. Lenape girls' soccer (23-1). Talk about handling the pressure. Over the last three seasons, the Indians have won three consecutive Group 4 state titles and three consecutive Coaches Association tournament titles.

That means coach Kevin Meder's team went 29-0 – 17-0 in the state tournament and 12-0 in the coaches' tournament – in a mounting series of highly competitive games of increasing importance, many of which were decided by one goal.

This year's team featured lots of young talent up front and strong, steady play from senior defenders such as Carolyn Wiley and Carley Carmody.

5. Paulsboro wrestling (24-1). Led by senior state champions Joe Duca and Zach Greenwald, the Red Raiders returned to the No. 1 spot in South Jersey for the first time in 10 years.

Duca went 42-0 at 125 pounds. Greenwald went 41-1 at 215 pounds. Coach Paul Morina's team also got great work from senior 119-pounder Sean DiEmma, junior 160-pounder Matt Cosgrove, and junior 130-pounder Dymere Rappa, among others.

Paulsboro went undefeated in the powerful Colonial Conference and captured the District 29 team title. The Red Raiders beat South Jersey Group 4 finalist Absegami, South Jersey Group

2 champion West Deptford and South Jersey Non-Public A champion St. Augustine Prep. In the state finals, Paulsboro beat Sussex County power Newton by a 40-18 score.

6. Cherokee football (11-1). The Chiefs were one of eight South Jersey football teams that finished the season with one loss. But they were the best of the bunch, based on their victories over previously unbeaten Williamstown (which finished 10-1) and Egg Harbor Township (11-1) in the Group 4 sectional tournament.

Coach P.J. Mehigan's team won the Olympic Conference's American Division title with an undefeated mark. The Chiefs suffered a loss to school-district rival Seneca on Thanksgiving Day, but responded like champions by shutting down Egg Harbor the next weekend in the swirling snow in the sectional title game.

Cherokee was led by seniors such as Tyler Powell, Sean Farrell, and Jeff Long.

7. Haddonfield boys' cross-country (10-0). The Bulldogs finished one of the great four-year runs in South Jersey cross-country history with a nagging sense they left some unfinished business out there in the woods.

Coach Nick Baker's team was running at another level in late September and early October. Haddonfield won big regional races in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and in the Bronx, and sensational senior Jon Vitez won individual competitions at both of those events.

Haddonfield won its fourth consecutive Group 2 state title as well. But it's a measure of the strength of this team that the Bulldogs felt like they could have accomplished more.

If healthy and running their best, the Bulldogs probably could have won the Meet of Champions and also earned a berth to the Nike Nationals.

That didn't happen. But after going undefeated against South Jersey competition, finishing No. 4 in the state and winning their fourth consecutive Group 2 state title, the Bulldogs belong in the mix with the best teams in any sport.

Also considered.Fall: Hammonton football (11-1), Rancocas Valley boys' soccer (19-3-3). **Winter:** Cherokee boys' basketball (23-7), St. Augustine Prep swimming (14-2), Gloucester Catholic ice hockey (15-4-2), Eastern girls' basketball (24-5), Haddonfield boys' swimming (14-1). **Spring:** Delsea boys' track (5-0), Gloucester Catholic baseball (24-7), Overbrook softball (28-3), Seneca girls' track (5-0), Gloucester Catholic softball (23-6), Shawnee girls' lacrosse (20-2), Moorestown girls' lacrosse (22-1), St. Augustine boys' lacrosse (19-3), Moorestown boys' tennis (28-4).

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