

Prep track: Seacrest honors Bowden, the school's first state champion

By ADAM FISHER

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NAPLES — Hearing 500 of your peers chant your name would fluster any 16-year-old. It's understandable, then, that Rachel Bowden struggled to find the right words Tuesday.

Bowden filed into Seacrest's gym that afternoon with the rest of her classmates for a pep rally to kick off the fall athletic season. What started as an introduction to all the teams, though, turned into a surprise celebration for Bowden and the state championship she won in the high jump last spring.

After Seacrest head of school Lynne Powell beckoned Bowden to join her in front of the crowd, the students began cheering "Rachel, Bow-den." Upon reaching the center of the gym floor, Bowden and her coach, Todd Borden, were presented with championship rings for the junior's accomplishment.

"It's a little overwhelming," Bowden said.

The ring, which Bowden designed herself, goes with the championship banner already hanging in the school's gymnasium. It is the only sports banner hanging at Seacrest, which has only had FHSAA sports for four years.

As Powell lauded the achievement, she noted how Bowden owns a record that can never be taken away — the first state champion in Stingrays history.

"It's pretty powerful," Bowden said. "It's a blessing, which is the best word I can say. It's neat."

Bowden has helped build the Stingrays' track and field program and put Seacrest athletics on the map. As an eighth-grader, she was the first from the school to go to the state finals. Bowden went to the Class 1A championship in 2006 in the long jump and the 300-meter hurdles.

With an eighth-place finish in the 300 hurdles, she became the first Seacrest athlete to medal. Her leap of 5-foot-4 as a sophomore in last year's finals gave her the school's only title.

Bowden also plays volleyball for Seacrest and has helped grow the third-year program by recruiting her classmates to the team. The Stingrays are 9-3 this fall.

"Rachel over the years has helped build both programs," said Borden, who started the Stingrays track and field team. "She's done a great job of getting better players out there in volleyball as well as track."

After a state title last spring, Bowden and Borden have their sights set on the national championships for 2009. If Bowden can add 2 inches to her high jump and clear 5-6, she could qualify for the Nike Outdoor Nationals this summer.

Bowden, her coach and an entire school expect more big things from the junior, who has two seasons left to improve. But what the Stingrays can be most proud of, Powell said, is Bowden's achievements in the classroom and as a person.

"You are the exact role model I would choose for all your friends," the head of school told Bowden.

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