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Surf City rallies to win tournament

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Surf City won three consecutive events to come from behind and win the Ortley Beach Lifeguard Tournament on Wednesday.

On the strength of first-place finishes in the swim relay, paddle relay and line pull, Surf City beat second-place Ortley Beach, 31-23. Sandy Hook finished third with 17 points, with Lavallette and Ship Bottom rounding out the top five.

Midway, Long Beach Township, Seaside Park, Island Beach State Park and Beach Haven also competed, making the 10-team event the largest in its history. This was the 35th time the tournament had been held.

Surf City was in third place after two events, trailing first-place Ortley Beach by seven points, but it earned the maximum 21 points over the next three events to clinch the title with one event remaining.

"With all of our results last year, doing so well, we know we have a chance every race we go to," Surf City lifeguard Andre Garner said. "Every race is strong. We feel like we have a good chance to win everything."

Garner contributed to Surf City's victories in the swim relay and line pull. He was one of four swimmers — joining Darren Podolak, Alan Bakes and Jeff Hahn — in the swim relay, which required each to swim approximately 175 yards.

Hahn narrowly beat a Sandy Hook lifeguard to the finish in the closest race of the evening. Garner said he and Hahn were chosen to swim the legs coming into shore because of their ability to catch and ride waves. Keeping a straight path was also key.

"The straighter the swim, it makes it a lot easier because if you take any kind of angle, you're taking extra strokes," Garner said. "In pretty much any lifeguard race, staying on your mark is important."

Matt Hollaway, Kyle Gronostajski, Ross Reynolds and Ryan Curtin followed the swim relay with a victory in the paddle relay, during which they took turns paddling to and/or from the buoy about 175 yards from shore.

Surf City then won the line pull, which featured Garner, attached to a line, swimming to the buoy and returning to shore with the help of pullers Gronostajski and Nick Labita. The victory, coupled with Ortley Beach failing to place, put Surf City ahead, 28-18, securing the title.

Ortley Beach won the first two events to take an early lead. Steve Koenigstein and Chris Johnson won the 1,000-foot row, finishing about six seconds ahead of the second-place Sandy Hook team, which had its boat tip as it approached land.

Swimmer Brian Molloy, paddler Chris Vargavick and rowers Casey Scallon and Craig Blanken then won the surf medley. Molloy, who set a pair of Ocean County Championships records as a senior last winter at Toms River High School East, was the first out of the water, giving Ortley Beach an approximate lead of 12 seconds.

Lavallette won the final event, the boat relay, which featured four different two-man crews rowing to the buoy and back to the beach.
