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Trojans pick up 10 state qualifiers

ANDY HAMILTON • IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN • FEBRUARY 15, 2009

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The main mission for the West High wrestling team entering Saturday's district meet was to accomplish a feat that had never been done.

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The Trojans looked at the brackets and saw a reasonable opportunity to qualify their entire lineup for next week's state meet. They saw a possibility to corner the market on qualifiers and snag 14 tickets to Des Moines.

"We felt like we had a realistic shot at all of them," West coach Mark Reiland said. "We certainly were capable in all those spots."

It would have been quite a story.

"That would've been pretty cool," said freshman Jack Hathaway (37-4), who pinned his way through the tournament at 103 pounds.

Instead, the Trojans had to settle for 10 qualifiers, a seventh straight district title and a pair of stories that, although they weren't historic, were pretty noteworthy.

Freshman Justin Koethe emerged as the champion of a bracket that featured three of the top six wrestlers in the Class 3A rankings at 135 pounds, junior 171-pounder David Solis continued his remarkable turnaround this season and five other Trojans won district titles to help West run away with yet another team title.

The Trojans piled up 270.5 points to finish 108 ahead of second-place Keokuk. City High finished third with 148.5 points and three state qualifiers. Jimmy Lazaro, Stephen Blayer and Kevin Harp punched their tickets to the state meet with district titles.

Koethe and Solis lead the West parade to state. The Trojans also picked up district titles from Hathaway, freshman Gradey Gambrall (125) and state champions Dylan Carew (140), Nick Moore (152) and Derek St. John (160). Jon Skarda (112), Garrett Hathaway (130) and Matt Behnami (215) advanced with runner-up finishes.

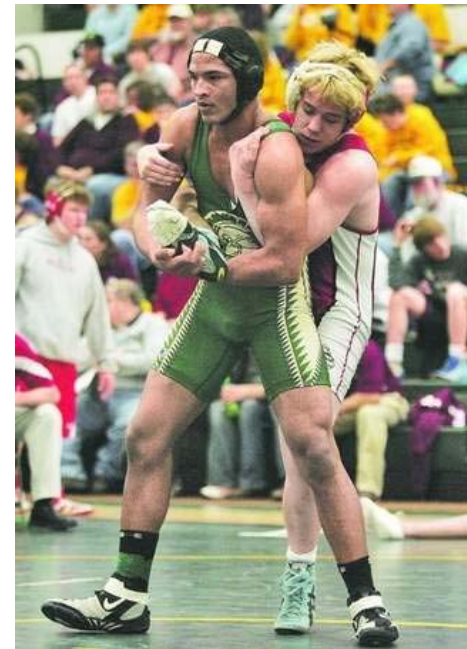
Koethe (39-6) disposed of Keokuk's second-ranked Julian Feikert and No. 5 Trevor Duke Saturday.

"That's a pretty good step for him, but I don't think he's done," Reiland said. "I think he's got a little higher aspirations than just qualifying."

The sixth-ranked West freshman beat Feikert, a state finalist last year, 9-6 in the semifinals and used a takedown with 24 seconds left in the third period to beat Duke 7-5 in the finals.

"I was a little bit nervous but mostly excited knowing I was going to get both of them today," Koethe said. "I've been thinking a lot about it. I knew I had to make it to state. I wasn't going to let myself not get there because I didn't want to be watching at the state tournament. I've been watching for three years. It's my turn to wrestle."

Solis (30-10) sat and watched in Des Moines last year and dreamed of one day getting on the mats in Wells



Press-Citizen / John Richard

West High's Savid Solis wrestles Ottumwa's Colton Sumner during their 171-pound match Saturday at West High in Iowa City.

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Fargo Arena. He was a long shot a year ago, finishing his sophomore season with a 4-10 record. He said he thought at the end of last year that it was possible to improve enough to qualify for the state meet this season.

"Somewhat but not really," he said. "I just had to follow my dreams and ended up following them to the fullest, and I got in."

Solis rolled up a 13-4 major decision against Mount Pleasant's Kody Aplara in the 171-pound finals.

"He works hard," Moore said. "He's definitely deserving of what he got today. He never backs down from anybody in practice. It was fun watching him, knowing how hard he works, that it finally showed for him."

Lazaro and Blayer said they received the dividends Saturday from their work in the practice room, too. After losses two weeks ago in the Mississippi Valley Conference tournament, they changed their training habits and started sparring against each other.

"We had never wrestled each other in practice, and now we're just going as hard as we can," Lazaro said. "We're trying to get to that podium (at the state meet)."

Both took big steps in that direction Saturday. Lazaro (27-7) showed off his high-wire act in the finals at 119, using a pair of lateral drops to accumulate 10 points in an 18-12 win against fifth-ranked Josh Greiner of Ottumwa.

"You never know what he's going to come up with," City coach Brad Smith said. "He makes up moves out there and a lot of times they work."

Blayer (28-7) made amends for a January loss with a second-period fall against Garrett Hathaway in the finals at 130.

"That's really big for me," Blayer said.

Harp (34-1) made his way back to the state meet at heavyweight after placing third at last year's district meet at 189 pounds. The City senior beat Mount Pleasant's Danny Kelley 1-0 in the finals.

Gambrall (25-8) wore out Keokuk's Chris Hoskins on his way to a 9-2 win at 125, giving the Trojans three freshman district champs.

West got typical top-notch performances from its state title triumvirate. Carew (24-1) hammered sixth-ranked Brett Sams of Oskaloosa 11-3 in the finals at 140. Moore (41-0) ran his career mark to 123-1 with a fall against Fort Madison's Andrew Cartwright at 152.

St. John (40-0) continued his dominance at 160, despite giving up his first takedown within state borders in more than a year. Fourth-ranked Joe Range of Burlington got to St. John for a score at the beginning of the second period. The Iowa recruit was on his way to a major decision when he pinned Range nearly a minute later.

Although 10 wasn't the number the Trojans had in mind entering Saturday, they still think they have enough firepower to finish No. 1 next Saturday night.

"I'm never going to say we're going to lose," Moore said. "I'm not counting us out. Maybe everybody else is, but I think we can win. I don't think our team wrestled all that time in the practice room to get second."

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