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Fast start for West

Six pins have Trojans within striking distance

ANDY HAMILTON • IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN • FEBRUARY 19, 2009

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DES MOINES -- There was no screwing around Wednesday for the West High wrestlers.

ADVERTISEMENT The second-ranked Trojans entered Wells Fargo Arena with intentions of pinning down another state championship, and West took to that task literally during the first day of the Class 3A tournament.

Thanks to six pins in the opening round, the Trojans momentarily grabbed the lead in the team race and finished the day right on the heels of top-ranked Waverly-Shell Rock.

"That's one of the things we try to harp on and talk about -- if you get a chance, you've got to put them away and don't screw around," West coach Mark Reiland said. "In some cases, our kids like to get takedowns and build up the score and try to put them away. But we've tried to make a point that if you can put them away, do it and don't think twice about it. Get it done, move on, and go from there."

Waverly-Shell Rock piled up 32 points and kept all nine of its qualifiers in the tournament, including eight who advanced to this afternoon's quarterfinals. West is second with 31.5 points and eight quarterfinalists.

"Nobody cares," Reiland said when the Trojans held the lead before the first round of consolations were complete. "They don't give out trophies today."

That's a good thing for City High. The Little Hawks went 1-2 in the opening round. Stephen Blayer rallied to advance at 130, but teammates Jimmy Lazaro and Kevin Harp dropped first-round decisions and will have to wrestle their way onto the medal stand through the consolations.

Freshmen Jack Hathaway, Grady Gambrall and Justin Koethe led the parade of pins for the Trojans during an opening day that rated somewhere between "overwhelming" and "exhilarating" for the West rookies.

"That's what I like to see -- those freshmen coming out strong," said top-ranked Nick Moore (42-0), whose pursuit of a third title began with a pin against Des Moines North-Hoover's Nick Vasey at 152. "That's exciting to me."

The Trojans also collected pins from top-ranked Derek St. John (41-0) at 160 and 171-pounder David Solis (31-10). West cashed in on more bonus points with a technical fall at 140 from No. 1 Dylan Carew (25-1) and a major decision from 215-pounder Matt Behnami (29-15) and kept 130-pounder Garrett Hathaway (30-14) in the tournament with a consolation win.

Hathaway's fourth-ranked little brother decked Fort Dodge's Matt Birnbaum with a first-period arm bar at 103 pounds.

"It was pretty exhilarating, especially when everyone first started yelling," said Jack Hathaway (38-4). "Then getting that first pin was a big accomplishment for me."

Gambrall (26-8) was in a tussle at 125 with North Scott's Garrett Seligmann until he seized the lead with a third-period takedown and scored the fall with five seconds left in the match.

"I kind of came out slow -- first match jitters," Gambrall said. "It's overwhelming how cool it is being out here."

Koethe (40-6) had no problem getting started at 135. He piled up a 12-2 lead at the end of the first period before pinning Cedar Rapids Jefferson's Vince Mulnix.

"These guys have been to bigger tournaments than this," Moore said of the West freshmen. "They know what to expect. But the Iowa state tournament is so built up that you don't know how they're going to handle it. You don't know what they're thinking."

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Even a returning medalist like Blayer (29-7) had some trouble. The City senior pulled himself out of an early 4-1 hole to win an 8-5 decision against Des Moines East's Tyler Slinger.

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"I got surprised by him," Blayer said. "I didn't think he was really going to go after it. That first match at state, for everybody, is kind of nerve-wracking and I just froze up a little bit."

A couple of slips were costly for Blayer's teammates. Lazaro (25-9) was leading in the second period against sixth-ranked Jay Hildreth of Council Bluffs Lewis Central until he got taken down and turned for three points in a 13-9 loss.

Sixth-ranked Harp (35-2) couldn't complete a season sweep against Waterloo West's Johntrell Humphrey, getting taken down to his back in overtime in a 9-4 loss. Harp had beaten Humphrey three times during the regular season.

Both of the City seniors stayed in the tournament with consolation wins.

"Both of those guys bounced back well, especially Kevin," City coach Brad Smith said. "I wasn't sure how he would react because he has his goals set pretty high. We'll take it one match at a time and see how far they can come back."

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