

Opinion: Wildcat wrestling experiences big turnaround



The Louisburg High School wrestling team has become a family in the last four years as the program has grown from zero state qualifiers to five in each of the last two years. Hard work and a family atmosphere is a big reason for the Wildcats' success.

In the last two years, the Louisburg wrestling team has had 10 state qualifiers, two state medalists and recently won its first Frontier League title in 19 years.

For some teams, those numbers may not seem like a big deal. However, where the Wildcat program was just three years ago – it is almost a minor miracle that these kinds of leaps can be made in that short of time.

It is something that only a “family” can accomplish.

Before Bobby Bovaird took over as the team's head coach for the 2011-12 season, the Wildcat team was in constant flux. Louisburg had four different coaches from 2007 to 2011 and it was hard for anyone to establish a program.

The Wildcats weren't without success as they had several state qualifiers during that time, including Austin Hood, who won three consecutive state titles. Bovaird came in on Hood's

final run through the state tournament and even he admitted it was a good first season.

“The first year was a fun one because I really felt like I was along for the ride with Austin Hood’s third state championship,” Bovaird said. “The next two years were very humbling.”

That they were.

During the 2013 and 2014 seasons, Louisburg was nowhere to be seen at the state tournament. Numbers were down in the program during those first two years and Bovaird was unable to field a full team for duals.

He realized he, and a lot of other people, had work to do.

“It’s taken a lot of patience,” Bovaird said. “Prior to the 2013 season, I’d never been a part of a team – as a coach or competitor – that failed to qualify a wrestler for state or that finished last in a tournament. The next year, 2014, we had some highlights, but when it came to regionals, we came home empty handed for the second straight year.

“Louisburg had never had back-to-back seasons with no qualifiers. After those two seasons, I was pretty frustrated, but at the same time I knew I had to be patient because there were good things happening at Louisburg.”

It took a lot of work. Bovaird made sure he stayed involved with every level of wrestling from the kids club, to middle school and the high school program.

Bovaird also wanted to make sure his team was seen throughout the community and make people care about the Wildcat program again.

“One main goal I had in taking over the program was to increase the visibility of the wrestling program with the community of Louisburg,” Bovaird said. “We needed to be seen

as an organization, not just an alternative to basketball in the winter. I'm incredibly proud of what the team has accomplished.

"I've also made a point to invest myself into the program beyond the mat, like summer camps away from home, team-building opportunities outside of regular practice time, fundraising efforts in the community in the off-season and other things."



Assistant coaches (from left) Andy Wright, Robert Ebenstein, LHS grad Brenton Wrigley and head coach Bobby Bovaird eagerly wait for pin during the regional tournament. Wrigley was a state qualifier a year ago and traveled to Columbus to cheer on his old team.

With the help of current assistants Robert Ebenstein and Andy Wright, and former ones in Aaron Ziadeh and Chad White, the personality of the Wildcat program is a different one.

It became obvious during the 2015 season as Louisburg was able to place high in some tournaments and field close to a full squad. Then, in the postseason, the Wildcats made their return to the state tournament for the first time in three years with five state qualifiers.

The Wildcats didn't have the medals to show for it, but they would only have to wait one more year for those to come. Juniors Mason Koechner and Nathan Keegan finished third and sixth, respectively, as Louisburg had five more wrestlers return to state in 2016.

Maybe no one personifies the growth of the team more than Anders Vance. The Louisburg senior was a part of those Wildcat teams his first two years that had to take some lumps and he took some hits right along with them.

As a freshman, the Wildcats didn't have a heavyweight so Vance was thrown right into the fire. He finished his first year with a 4-22 record.



Anders Vance accomplished a lot during his four years with the Wildcat program. He started as a four-win wrestler as a freshman to a two-time state qualifier.

“He stepped up and wrestled varsity when we had no other upper classmen to fill those weights, and he spent that year going head-to-head with grown men,” Bovaird said.

Vance, like the team, got a little better his second season as he finished with 18 wins and just a few shy of a .500 record. Then, in his junior year, Vance took off.

He ended the year with a 27-9 record despite missing two tournaments with a concussion and eventually qualified for his first state tournament after winning a regional title.

Then came Vance’s senior year that saw him grow into 44 wins, a league champion and a two-time state qualifier. He has also been a team captain the last two years and has done what it takes to get better.

That hard work has given him the seventh-most wins in team

history and has set the career record for team points with 566.

“Even though he didn’t reach the medal stand at state, he’s got so much to be proud of,” Bovaird said. “He’s been a regular fixture at our summer team camps and open mat workouts, and he made the trek to Nebraska for the Outdoor Challenge Camp two years ago.

“His success mirrors that of the team over the past five seasons. He took his lumps as a freshman, made big strides as a sophomore, and then really blossomed as a junior and senior. I’d say that’s how the team has grown over those years, too.”

Vance has been a part of a special senior class for Bovaird and one that has helped the team grow, not only on the mat, but behind the scenes.

Senior Chris Turner jumped from two wins a season ago to 21 victories this season on the varsity level, while senior Zach Jones doubled his wins from eight to 16 this season.

Fellow seniors Dillin Roberts and Bradley Trageser saw time in several varsity tournaments this year, but had to wrestle unattached and also spent some time at the junior varsity level. Even though there were wrestlers ahead of them, both still wanted to help the team in any way they could.

“There’s an epidemic of egoism in sports these days; guys can’t handle the fact that it’s not about them, so they quit,” Bovaird said. ‘I’m not going to be the star,’ ‘so-and-so has the starting spot,’ ‘I can’t handle the pressure’ – all these egocentric excuses for why they quit their senior year. These six guys stuck it out. Dillin and Bradley both spent the year at junior varsity, but they also wrestled in many varsity meets and contributed to much of our success.”

Even though the journey has brought a lot of rewards, there was also some heartache along the way. The Wildcat wrestling

family was rattled back in January 2015 when teammate Jimmy Dolan was involved in an automobile accident that left him with severe head trauma.

It was tough on a lot of people within the program, including Bovaird and Jimmy's best friend – Zach Jones. While Jimmy was in the hospital, Zach would spend a lot of time in the hospital by his side.

The road to recovery was a long one for Jimmy, but he eventually made his way back to where he could return to school and also rejoined the Wildcat team this year. Although he couldn't wrestle, Jimmy spent time helping the team in any way he could, that included supporting Zach.



Jimmy Dolan records his teammate, and friend, Zach Jones' match during the regional tournament. Dolan could often be found alongside the mat cheering on his friend.

Just like Zach did for Jimmy a year ago, Jimmy returned the favor as he could often be seen on the side of the mat during Zach's matches supporting him and videotaping his matches.

"Jimmy's story has been the toughest I've been a part of as a coach," Bovaird said. "Last year when he had his accident, he had been wrestling the best I'd ever seen him wrestle. He was on pace to be a state qualifier as a junior, and who knows what would have been possible as a senior.

"He's been by Zach Jones' side the whole season and is a very loyal friend. It could have been easier for him to just call it quits and step away from the sport, because it had to be so tough for him to be unable to ever wrestle again. But he stuck it out. He did what he could to contribute to the program. He was Zach's biggest fan, his coach, and his friend, and he tried to impart his knowledge to the younger wrestlers and do what he could to motivate them."

This team is one big family and it is one of the main reasons for the tournament. The program has a different atmosphere around it even trickles down to the managers – especially seniors Paige Shaffer and Alyssa Ellifrits.

"They are like sisters," Bovaird said. "I'd recruited Paige as a freshman, and midway through the year Alyssa started helping out. Ever since, they've been outstanding managers. Keeping accurate stats, washing singlets and mopping the mats, helping with inventory, training younger managers and cheering on the boys. They even got to make the trip to state to see the season's successes reach their peak."



Jacob Felder, Ben Hupp, Nathan Keegan, Hunter Bindi and Thad Hendrix lay next to the mat to watch Mason Koechner's regional finals match. The Wildcat wrestlers have been supportive of each other all season.

As good as the last two years have been, Bovaird also realizes it comes to an end for what has been a special senior class in more ways than one.

"I had a hard time keeping stoic at league, with the excitement of winning our first league title in nearly 20 years, and I barely held back the tears at regionals and state," Bovaird said. "When we have our season banquet, it'll be tough saying goodbye to this group of seniors because they're like family to all of us in the program."

Those "family" members might be moving on, but the core of the Wildcat wrestling program is as solid as ever.

Koechner, Keegan, Hunter Bindi and Thad Hendrix will be returning state qualifiers and Louisburg will also get a state qualifier from 2015 back in Ryan Adams, who missed all this year with an injury. More qualifiers are sure to follow in

2017 and life in the program is healthier than ever.

“We’re losing a good group of seniors, and they’re going to be missed, but they did their part to add to the foundation of Louisburg,” Bovaird said. “When a season like this one ends, I can’t help but get excited for what’s left to come.”