

# Wildcats honor seniors as they prepare for different looking postseason



*Eight Louisburg wrestling seniors were recognized on Jan. 21 during Senior Night. (From left) manager Kadence Collins, head coach Bobby Bovaird, Jacob Briley, Alec Younggren, Ryan Owens, Cade Holtzen, Luke Kelly, Jarrett Hoyle and manager Lexi Rogers.*

The Louisburg wrestling team knew this season was going to be different than the others.

It was inevitable.

With the concerns of COVID-19, many schools have scrapped tournaments for duals, and that has resulted in fewer matches for many of the wrestlers.

It has affected the Wildcats, as with two open weight classes some nights, they struggle in the dual format. Louisburg has lost four duals in the last two weeks, including setbacks to Tonganoxie and Baldwin on Senior Night.

Even with that, the Wildcats are finding positives, in what otherwise is a tough situation for them and many others across the state.

“It’s been weird not going to some of the traditional competitions we’ve had in the past,” Louisburg coach Bobby

Bovaird said. "I found out that Topeka USD 501 isn't allowing wrestling at all this season, but they're allowing basketball and swimming / diving in their district. They're probably the only district in the state to not have wrestling this year. That's always been a nice tournament for our guys to go and find some success. We aren't getting as many matches as we've done in the past, which is frustrating. Cade Holtzen was on pace to win 150+ career matches, and Ryan Owens and Alec Younggren would have hit the 100+ career wins mark if we'd had our normal schedule.

"It's been nice having the duals – it gives a traditional feel to the sport. Wrestling used to be about duals and head-to-head, and there was a strategy to winning duals. About 20 years ago, the trend changed to tournaments – maximize your competition points, get your kids as many matches as possible, and push them to the point of exhaustion. I think this year has been nice with fewer weekend competitions. It allows the wrestlers (and the coaches) to enjoy life a little more. If there's been one good thing about Covid, it's been that for many of us, life has slowed down to one degree or another. We're enjoying things we hadn't typically been able to enjoy because of everything that is going on in our daily lives."

One of those positives came last week when Louisburg had a chance to honor their six senior wrestlers and two managers. Ryan Owens, Jarrett Hoyle, Luke Kelly, Cade Holtzen, Alec Younggren and Jacob Briley, along with managers Kadence Collins and Lexi Rogers, were honored with their parents.

Even with masks on, it was a ceremony that allowed a successful senior class to be honored.

The class has a combined 339 wins, 375 takedowns, 213 pins, 18 tech falls, 12 gold medals, 15 silver medals, seven trips to the state tournament and four state medals.



***Louisburg senior Ryan Owens works for a pin against Baldwin last week.***

“These seniors are a diverse group, and I’m so proud of each of them,” Bovaird said. “I’ve known Cade and Ryan since they were little, and they’ve truly come a long way over the last 10 years. Luke is a kid that I tried to convince to wrestle when he was a freshman, but it didn’t pan out. The next year, he was talked into it, and he’s been a true leader when it comes to work ethic and tough attitude. Jarrett is a prime example of what wrestling can do for a person. He started out in 7th grade, and the strides he’s made the last six years are incredible. He’s competitive, he’s coachable, and he’s done a fantastic job of mentoring younger wrestlers to help them learn the ropes.

“Jacob has finally gotten the chance to wrestle varsity at his own weight, rather than bumping up to fill a varsity hole.

He's working his tail off and looking more and more solid with each match. Alec has been a huge addition to the team. Not only has he been a leader in statistical categories, but he's able to bring his own experience, techniques, and styles to help all the guys in our room find their own way of being successful."

For Younggren, he has been as successful as any of the Wildcats this season. He transferred from Olathe South last season, where he finished third at Class 6A state at 220 pounds.



***Senior Alec Younggren puts his Tonganoxie opponent on his back last week during Senior Night.***

Younggren has continued to show his dominance as he has an unblemished record of 22-0 and is currently the No. 2 ranked wrestler at 220 pounds. His closest match this season has been

a 9-1 major decision back in December.

The lack of tournaments has decreased his match total and hasn't had the kind of challenges to test him that he will see in the postseason. Still, the coaches are doing their best to get him ready.

"When there's not quite a suitable practice partner in the room, that burden typically falls on the coaches' shoulders," Bovaird said. "Coach (Brandon) Ott and I have been taking turns working in with Alec the last week. We're mixing things up a little by having Alec work with Aiden Barker (who weighs about 40 pounds less than he does) and Elijah Eslinger, but often times, it's us coaches who get to step in and go live with him. It's painful, but definitely a way to help prepare him.

"There are many days when we see Alec jumping rope before practice or staying afterwards to do an extra workout. He's a driven young man, and I'm excited to see what he does as he progresses through the state championship series."

Including Younggren, the Wildcats have six wrestlers who have a .500 record or better.

Holtzen – a two-time state medalist – is currently ranked No. 4 in Class 4A at 132 pounds with a 23-1 mark. Owens, who finished fifth at state a season ago, has a 15-3 record at 120 pounds.

Junior Aiden Barker has had a strong season at 182 pounds with a 17-6 record and sophomore heavyweight Elijah Eslinger is 11-10. Sophomore Kaven Bartlett is 11-11 at 126 pounds.

Along with the changes to the regular season, the Wildcats will see a much-different looking postseason.

In the past, teams would compete in regional tournaments and the top four from each weight class advanced to state.

Now, to keep numbers down in competitions, the Kansas State High School Activities Association has broken the postseason up into three different tournaments – districts, regionals and sub-state.

Louisburg will travel to Santa Fe Trail High School on Feb. 6 for the district tournament that will include Baldwin, Eudora, Bishop Miege, Ottawa and Bishop Ward.



***Senior Cade Holtzen tries to turn his opponent to his back last week against Tonganoxie.***

The top four in each weight class will advance to regionals, which will take place on Feb. 12. The top four in each class at regionals, will then advance to sub-state on Feb. 20, which will be held in Chanute.

The top four from sub-state will move on to the one-day state tournament in Salina – a change from the usual two-day event.

"I'm disappointed in the decision KSHSAA made to adjust the postseason the way they did," Bovaird said. "Apparently, they did it without consulting very many people in the wrestling community – administrators and coaches. They're trying to make smaller tournaments to minimize possible Covid-19 exposure, but what they've essentially done is doubled the exposure. Sure, the first week of postseason will just be 7-8 teams, rather than 15-16. It might be a one-day tournament, but the next weekend at regionals, another single-day tournament, there will be 15-16 schools / communities represented. At sub-state, there may be as many as 32 communities represented, and state will have anywhere from 54-64 communities represented. Instead of two weekends of exposure, there are now four weekends.

"If a kid makes it through districts, and then the kid comes down with Covid-19, then his entire team is out for the rest of the season. Depending on the county and all of the various policies, there may be contact tracing ramifications that wipe out an entire wrestling district. I wish they would have done some more research and consulting. I'd rather have the traditional regional tournament – 15-16 teams, two days – at the start of February and keep state at the same time. That way, we'd have time for quarantined kids to get cleared and get back on the mat before state, minimizing the disruption to the competition. But, it is what it is.

"I'm not sure what the changes will mean for us," Bovaird added. "Essentially, to qualify for the state tournament this year, it means you have to do the equivalent of making it to the "blood round" at the traditional state tournament of previous years. That's tough. A lot of returning state placers, state-ranked kids, and truly excellent wrestlers will be sitting at home instead of warming up in Salina this year, and that's sad. I don't think it's fair to tell these kids, "Hey, at least you got a season." That's not good enough. Our kids deserve better."

Louisburg has two more sets of duals before the start of the postseason. On Friday, the Wildcats travel to Eudora and will also face Piper.

The Wildcats will then travel to Ottawa on Saturday for a quad with Rock Creek and Concordia.