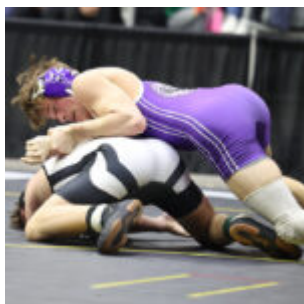


Holtzen, Younggren return home as state medalists



Louisburg senior Cade Holtzen tries to hold Andale's AJ Furnish to the mat during the third-place match Saturday in Salina.

SALINA – Cade Holtzen and Alec Younggren didn't get to leave Salina on Saturday with what they were hoping to earn.

Only a select few get to leave with the title of "state champion," and both Louisburg seniors were close to reaching their goal. Despite that, both wrestlers helped the Wildcat team to their best state finish in nearly 11 years.

Younggren reached the championship match, only to finish second at 220 pounds, while Holtzen rallied back to medal third at 132 during the Class 4A Kansas State Wrestling Championships at the Tony's Pizza Events Center. The two wrestlers combined to score 30 points, which put them 14th in the team standings.

Louisburg hadn't finished that high since 2010, when Austin Hood won his first of three state titles and his brother Bryce, took second. The Wildcats were 10th that year.

The Wildcats nearly had their first state champion since 2012 when Younggren reached the 220 pound finals and he was more than ready to finish out his perfect season.

To start the tournament, Younggren opened with an 8-2 decision

against Goodland's Dexter Dautel in the quarterfinals. Then in the semis, he pinned Clay Center's Keegan McDonald in the third period to earn a spot in his first state championship match.

Then came the battle of unbeatens when Younggren took his perfect record against No. 1 ranked Cayden Winter of Andale.

Winter got out to a quick start and led Younggren 5-1 going into the third period. The Louisburg senior got an escape to start the third period, but Winter responded with a takedown to make it 7-2.

Younggren followed with another escape and a takedown to cut it to 7-5. He just couldn't the back points he was looking for as Winter scored a reversal in the final seconds and handed Younggren his first loss in a 9-5 decision.

"I felt like I wrestled to the best of my ability and I gave my all and that's all I could do," Younggren said. "It may not be the outcome I wanted, but at the end of the day I know I gave my all that's I can do.

"I think my finals match the hardest part for me. Wrestling Winter's speed was something I haven't seen the whole year and being down early in the match didn't help. Going into the third period I just could make up the ground I had lost."



Alec Younggren reacts to advancing to his first state championship match Saturday at the state tournament in Salina.

Younggren finished his season with a 37-1 record and a second place medal, which is the school's highest individual placer since 2012.

"All season long, Alec has been a beast on the mat for us," Louisburg coach Bobby Bovaird said. "He was a great addition to the program this year, and he fell right in with the team as though he'd been a part of it all four years. From the very beginning, he bought into the Wildcat Wrestling philosophy and he had an immediate impact on his teammates. Over the years, I've worked with a lot of strong athletes, but I think pound-for-pound, Alec has to be one of the strongest kids I've ever worked with. It doesn't matter the position – top, bottom, or neutral, he's immovable. When he wants to move, he's like a charging bull and there's not much you can

do to stop him.

"I'm especially proud of his work ethic and competitiveness, and I know those qualities definitely influenced the other wrestlers. Also, he's got a great wrestling knowledge that includes a style that matches very well with my own and a style influenced by freestyle and greco-roman wrestling. I know how much he wanted to win that state title this year, and the thing that I praised about him is the fact that he overcame so much this year. There was the broken foot, the fact that he was a new kid in a new school his senior year, the uncertainties of Covid, and the move to a new classification. He was untouchable this season, though. All the way to the state tournament, he'd only seen the third period one time. He'd put so much work into getting that state title, and it breaks my heart that he came up so close of that goal."



Alec Younggren works to take down Clay Center's Keegan McDonald during the 220-pound semifinal match.

Holtzen's tough moment came in the semifinals as he was vying for his first state championship appearance. He opened the tournament with a 4-2 decision over Pratt's Kaiser Pelland to move on to the semifinals to square off with Mulvane's Chadwick Stahl.

The match had a lot of action as a scramble seemed to Stahl on his back and Holtzen with a pin. Instead, Stahl fought it off and another scramble put Holtzen on his back and he wasn't able to get out of it.

Stahl pinned Holtzen in 1 minute and 18 seconds and Holtzen was forced to try for the third place medal instead.

"Oh I definitely know that I had the pin," Holtzen said. "I was looking at his shoulders and he was flat. But sometimes

the ref doesn't call the call and he got a little lucky and flipped me and then I just couldn't get out of it. I feel like I was 100 percent the best wrestler in that bracket, so it's tough knowing I should've been holding that bracket on top of the podium."



Cade Holtzen looked like he had a pin of Mulvane's Chadwick Stahl during the 132-pound semifinal match on Saturday.

Holtzen, who is the program's leader in wins, responded to record two more to his end career on a winning note.

The Louisburg senior won a 2-0 decision over Scott City's Zach Rohrbough and then followed it up with a convincing 7-2 decision over Andale's AJ Furnish. Furnish was the No. 1 ranked wrestler in the weight class going into the tournament.

After the match, Holtzen got a hug from his coach after realizing his wrestling career was over.

“There were a lot of tears shed, but not as many as I would’ve thought,” Holtzen said. “I think that’s just because of all that I fought through and accomplished this season that it would be a shame to be anything but proud of the result. Of course I’m sad that it’s over, but I have nothing but love and gratitude to the sport that has given me so much.”

Holtzen finished his season with a 38-2 record and a third place state medal, which is a career-best. He also become a 3-time state medalist in the process as he was wrestling with a heavy heart after his grandfather, C.D., passed away earlier that week.



Cade Holtzen shares a hug with head coach Bobby Bovaird following his final state match Saturday in Salina. Holtzen finished his season with a 38-2 record.

"Ten years ago when I first came to Louisburg, Cade was one of the first wrestlers I got to meet," Bovaird said. "For years, I'd been looking forward to seeing this skinny second grader grow up and join our high school program, and from the very beginning of his high school career, I knew he'd leave a huge footprint on our program. In addition to the past four years of LHS wrestling, I've worked with him throughout the years as a youth and middle school wrestling coach, his high school English teacher, and his gifted teacher. I've formed a bond with him that has taught me more about wrestling, coaching, and teaching than I think he'll ever realize. I'm the coach I am today due in part to my relationship with him.

"As he finishes up his high school career, I can say that I am nothing but proud of him and grateful for the opportunity to coach him. He had a tough tournament, coming so close to getting that state title. There's a series of photos that were taken during his semifinals match where you can clearly see that he had his opponent pinned, but that's the way it goes. He suffered a huge setback, and, as I told him after his third place match, 99 percent of people who come that close to a goal would throw up their hands and say, "Why bother?" Not Cade. I asked him what he chose to do instead of that, and he said he finished the job. He battled back and overcame all the disappointment and emotions by knocking off two very strong wrestlers. By doing that, he became the 1 percent. I told him that I was so proud of him, but more importantly, his grandfather is looking down, even more proud. With that, we both cried, but I know that Cade has found some peace from it."

It was an emotional ending to what had been a successful season for the Wildcats, one that sees the departure of three seniors who made big impacts on the program in Holtzen,

Younggren and Ryan Owens.

"With these seniors, along with Ryan Owens, they've brought five state medals to our program, and Alec brought a state medal from his previous school," Bovaird said. "They earned 10 trips to the state tournament in their careers. It was pretty special at state this weekend when a wrestler from another league school came up to me, shook my hand, and said, 'Coach, congratulations on this season. You're really building something special there in Louisburg.' This kid had no reason to say that to me, nothing to gain. It got me thinking about things. It's not that I'm building something myself; it's all the youth coaches who've had an impact on these kids, the middle school coaches, the assistant coaches, the parents, the teammates, the alumni, and the families.

"Cade and Alec represent a diverse scope of influence that has led the Louisburg Wrestling program to where it is today – and where it's going in the future. Cade and Ryan are grassroots, home-grown products of Louisburg, and with Alec, it's an example of a stellar athlete and his family having trust in our program to continue building on what he'd already accomplished. Cade and Ryan wouldn't have stayed here if they didn't have faith in the program, and Alec wouldn't have come here if he and his family hadn't liked the whole program. Seeing these seniors graduate is definitely bittersweet. They leave huge shoes to fill, but at the same time, I know that each of them will be incredibly successful in anything they choose to do in life."