FANTASTIC FIVE: Wildcats qualify 5 for state tournament



Louisburg's (from left) Kaven Bartlett, Brandon Doles, Elijah Eslinger, Aiden Barker and Ashton Moore each qualified for the state tournament following Saturday's Class 4A regional tournament in Paola.

PAOLA – The roller coaster that was the Class 4A regional tournament had several highs and lows for the Louisburg wrestling team.

However, when the ride was done, five Wildcats punched their ticket to the Class 4A state tournament this weekend in Salina.

Senior Aiden Barker, junior Kaven Bartlett and freshman Ashton Moore finished as regional runners-up, while senior Brandon Doles and junior Elijah Eslinger both took third overall Saturday in Paola.

"On paper, I thought we had a shot to get 7-8 qualified," Louisburg coach Bobby Bovaird said. "I just felt pretty good about how the guys have been practicing and competing. A few things would have had to go our way, but that's the way it goes sometimes. It's a pretty good feeling to have gotten three into the finals and to have the other two win their 3rd place matches at the end of the day."

Barker, who was ranked third the state at 195 pounds, squared off with No. 6 Jared Ferguson from Ottawa after pinning his way to the finals. The Louisburg senior had beaten him twice already this season, and looked like he was going to do it again.



Louisburg senior Aiden Barker finished second at 195 pounds.

Barker (27-6) built an 8-2 lead into he second period after putting Ferguson on his back on a couple different occasions. Unfortunately, Ferguson caught Barker and pinned him in the second to prevent him from getting a regional title.

“Aiden looked dominant for 98 percent of that match,” Bovaird said. “He got a great takedown and then was having his way on top. Aiden got in a scramble and did the one thing we were yelling for him not to do, and it ended up costing him. (Ferguson) is a pinner – when he gets kids on their back, it’s tough for them to get off.”

Bartlett got some revenge of his own at 126 pounds. He squared off with Paola’s Ryan Pankov in the semifinals, who he lost to

twice earlier this season and Pankov was No. 3 in the state going into the tournament.

The Louisburg junior scored some big points late as he held on for a 7-6 decision to defeat Pankov and advance to the finals. Unfortunately, Bartlett ran up against No. 1 Braeden Moore of Tonganoxie and was pinned in the first period of the championship match.



Louisburg junior Kaven Bartlett works for some back points Saturday at the 4A regional tournament.

“Kaven’s semifinal match is one that I’ll remember for a long time,” Bovaird said. “He’d lost to that kid twice before, and it’s always been a physical match and really close. Kaven stuck to his game plan and kept his cool through a very physical match, and he never stopped wrestling.

“It paid off big-time as he got the reversal and the winning back points to get a 7-6 revenge win. He was on a mission, and his regional performance really put him in a great place for state.”

Moore (25-11), who was wrestling in his first regional tournament, put together three strong wins to get to the finals at 170 pounds.

He opened with a wild 15-9 win over Ottawa's John Sink and then won by decision over Topeka-Hayden's Broderick Desch and Perry-Lecompton's Christian Conklin.

Moore squared off with Tonganoxie's Tyler Pankey, who is ranked No. 4 in the state, and was pinned in the first period.

"Ashton really stepped up," Bovaird said. "For a freshman to be a regional finalist at a middle-weight like 170 pounds is a pretty impressive feat. He kept his head and withstood whatever pressure he might have been feeling."



Louisburg senior Brandon Doles celebrates his overtime victory Saturday in his third-place match.

As for Doles (7-3), the Louisburg senior has been wrestling less than half a season after coming off an injury, but came

through with a strong performance to send him to his third state tournament.

He opened with a 3-0 decision over Santa Fe Trail's Aidan Slavin, before meeting Tonganoxie's Gabriel Bailey in the semifinals, who is the No. 1 ranked wrestler at 182 pounds, and lost 9-3.

Doles bounced back win a pin over Paola's Bryson Schull in the consolation semifinals, and then outlasted Jeff West's Keaton Shelman for a 3-1 overtime victory to finish third.

"We're really starting to get some glimpses of the old Brandon, and it's exciting to see," Bovaird said. "He has been getting closer and closer to wrestling shape, and that was evident in his semifinals loss to the No. 1 wrestler in the state. On the back side, he pulled out an overtime win against a Jeff West wrestler who has 32 wins on the season and was the third seed in the tournament."

Eslinger also had a big tournament at 285 pounds as the Louisburg junior put together a 4-1 record. He opened with a pair of pins over Hayden's Hunter Diederich and Tonganoxie's Cooper Jones.

After getting pinned by Bishop Miege's Baker North in the semifinals, Eslinger (26-8) responded with a 4-1 decision over Diederich in the consolation semis to secure his spot at state. He then followed it up with a 53 second pin of Baldwin's Jake Van Horn in the third place match.

"Elijah had beaten most of the other guys in his bracket throughout the season, but regionals is always a crazy tournament," Bovaird said. "It's tough to beat a good wrestler once, let alone multiple times, and Elijah did just that – he had rematches with Tonganoxie and Baldwin, and he also had to beat the Topeka-Hayden kid twice."

Junior Jesse Murphy (152 pounds) and freshman Jay McCaskill

(138) found themselves one victory away from earning a spot at state as both reach the consolation semifinals.

Murphy was pinned by an opponent from Eudora, but McCaskill’s match had more drama.

McCaskill led Royal Valley’s Quinton Nelson 4-1 with 15 seconds left and the wrestlers had to restart at the center of the mat. Unfortunately, McCaskill got caught in a scramble and gave up reversal and back points in a 5-4 loss.

All five qualifiers will compete at the Class 4A state tournament beginning at 10 a.m. on Friday in Salina and the top six in each weight class will earn a medal.

“With the strong finishes at regionals, all five of our guys are in good positions in their brackets at state,” Bovaird said. “They’re all going to have great chances not just to win some matches, but to bring home state medals.”