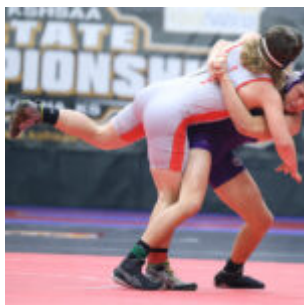


Wildcats earn three state medals for first time in program history



Louisburg senior Aiden Barker puts Ottawa's Jarod Ferguson to the mat during the fifth-place match Saturday at the Class 4A State Wrestling Championships in Salina.

Louisburg wrestling has had its fair share of state medalists in its long history, but what the Wildcats accomplished last weekend at the Tony's Pizza Events Center in Salina was something the program had never seen before.

The Wildcats left the Class 4A state tournament with three state medalists, the most for one year in program history.

Aiden Barker (195 pounds), Kaven Bartlett (126) and Elijah Eslinger (285) each finished in the top six in their respective weight classes and put together their best performances of the season. It was also the first time each of them earned a state medal.

"This season was the most state placers we've had in a single year in program history," Louisburg coach Bobby Bovaird said. "Prior to 1992, KSHSAA only medaled the top 4 in each weight. In both 1988 and 1989, we had two top-4 placers and one top-6 placer, but this really shows how the program is progressing and developing. We nearly had four medalists, too."

Barker, a senior, was a favorite for a medal heading into

Salina and finished fifth overall with a 13-1 major decision over Ottawa's Jared Ferguson in the fifth-place match.



Aiden Barker hugs coach Bobby Bovaird after winning his fifth place match Saturday in Salina.

He opened the tournament with a quick pin of Independence's Isaiah Melugin and advanced to the quarterfinals against the tournament favorite, Wamego's Hayden Oviatt, who was undefeated heading into state.

Oviatt, who had pinned Barker earlier in the season, got an unexpected test for the Louisburg senior. Barker battled Oviatt for three period and nearly pulled off the upset of the tournament, but lost a close 7-6 decision.

"With Oviatt I had a lot to prepare for," Barker said. "It's always tough when you go against an opponent who has an undefeated record and previously beaten you in a decisive fashion. I really had to get my head straight and see that match as just another match against another good kid."

“Honestly going into it, I didn’t think I was going to win, but once I stepped out onto the mat I thought ‘why not me?’ As the match progressed, I just believed in myself more and more and honestly I don’t think I’ve wrestled a match as good as I did in that match.”

The loss forced Barker to wrestle on the back side of the bracket and reeled off a pin over Baldwin’s Zayne Nowak in his first match Saturday. He then followed it up with a pin of Tonganoxie’s Wyatt Harris in the first period to secure a state medal.



Louisburg assistant coach Shawn Crossley and Elijah Eslinger were all smiles after Aiden Barker secured his first state medal.

In the consolation semis, Barker suffered a difficult 8-6 loss to Rose Hill’s Cade Evans, which set up a rematch with Ferguson, who defeated Barker in the regional championship a week before.

“Wrestling for third would have been great, but getting that revenge match against Ferguson to end it all was all I could ask for,” Barker said. “The season overall I couldn’t have asked for anything better than having some new coaches stepping in and doing a great job. It really meant a lot to me to finish off my career with coaches as great as coach Crossley, coach Miller and coach Bovaird in my corner and to walk out of my last ever match with a win and feel the emotions of the coaches and the Louisburg wrestling community it was like none other.”

Late in the match against Ferguson, up 13-0, Barker did something that caught Bovaird’s eye and it left him more proud of his senior wrestler than he already was.

“Aiden wrestled tough and smart, and in the final seconds of that fifth place match, he did something that gave me chills,” Bovaird said. “He saw the final seconds ticking away and gave his opponent the escape. As they walked back to the center of the mat, Aiden raised his opponent’s hand. I asked him later what was going on, and he answered that he didn’t want the kid to go scoreless in the last match of his senior year. Talk about character right there – sportsmanship like that and the small gesture of respect goes a long way in my book.”



Kaven Bartlett works for a pin against Holcomb's Greg Martinez in the first round Friday at Salina.

Bartlett and Eslinger also left lasting impressions on the Wildcat program as each medaled sixth overall after both nearly turned their brackets upside down as they advanced to the semifinals on Friday. They both guaranteed themselves a medal on the first day.

However, Bartlett's journey didn't look all the optimistic as he found himself on his back in his first round match against Holcomb's Greg Martinez. The Louisburg junior had to battle off his back for the final minute of the first period.

After surviving the scare, Bartlett would go on to pin Martinez in the second period and put his special weekend into motion.

"One centimeter made the difference for Kaven and his state tournament," Bovaird said. "Had he been pinned in the first period of that opening match, it would have been an entirely

different tournament for him. Regardless, he battled through the rest of that match to get the pin, and he fought every second of the rest of his matches. He's proven that he can compete with the top wrestlers in the state – in fact, he's now one of them. He's made incredible strides this season, and I'm excited for next year."



Head coach Bobby Bovaird (left) and assistant Shawn Crossley let out some emotion following Bartlett's quarterfinal win Friday.

Bartlett would use that momentum to upset No. 5 Cooper Wuthnow from Abilene in a 4-2 decision in overtime. Bartlett nearly earned another upset in the semifinals, but couldn't get past Concordia's Daniel Vines in a 3-1 loss.

Bartlett would have to wrestle Tonganoxie's Braeden Moore, who was the No. 1 ranked wrestler coming into the tournament, in the consolation semifinals and lost a tough 4-1 decision. He

then wrestled McPherson's Treyton Pelnar for fifth and fell 2-0 in the final seconds of overtime.

"Saturday was a very tough day as I started off against the number 1 ranked kid in 4A and ranked second in all classes in my first match," Bartlett said. "This guy has been one of the only people to pin me in my high school career but I made the match way closer at state as I lost 4-1.

"I have a lot of great plans for next season as I have chose to focus on just wrestling. I have plans to do a lot of tournaments and camps around the nation this summer to get me prepared for next season."



Kaven Bartlett was pumped following his quarterfinal win in overtime Friday.

Eslinger provided some memorable moments of his own as he upset two state-ranked wrestlers in his first two matches of

the day. He pinned No. 5 Willy Jon Morales of Augusta and No. 6 Jake Eddington of Columbus in the first period to advance to the quarterfinals.

“I knew going into the state tournament that Elijah would have perhaps the toughest path to a state medal – that a couple things would have to go his way early in the tournament,” Bovaird said. That’s exactly what happened. In the 285 weight class, sometimes it just takes a little bit of faith and a whole lot of stubbornness, and that’s what Elijah did. He went out there and wrestled hard, but he had some fun and believed in himself.”

Eslinger was later pinned by Rose Hill’s Milan Colvin in the semifinals, and would fall to Morales in the consolation semifinals by a 5-0 decision and then was pinned by Clay Center’s Luke Young in the fifth-place match.



Louisburg's Elijah Eslinger puts Columbus' Jake Eddington on his back for a pin Friday during the state quarterfinal round.

"I feel that I wrestled good and was allowed to run my preferred move on my opponents," Eslinger said. "I was extremely surprised to learn that they were both ranked wrestlers after the matches.

"Getting a state medal does make me excited for next season as the team focuses on the phrase, 'Continuous Improvement.' However high I got this year, I'm going to do better next year."



Louisburg coach Bobby Bovaird and Elijah Eslinger were all smiles after earning his first state medal Friday.

Amidst all the excitement, the Wildcats also watched two wrestlers leave Salina without a medal, including senior Brandon Doles.

Doles, who missed all of last season with a leg injury and missed the first half of this season with a shoulder problem, found himself one victory away from earning his first state medal.

After a tough first round loss in a 2-1 ultimate tie-breaker setback to Burlington's Brock Zimmerman, Doles had to wrestle on the consolation side and got a win Friday in a close 4-3 decision over Clearwater's Alec Beasley.

Doles then put together some more dramatics as he scored two points in the final seconds to pull off a 7-5 decision over Augusta's Thomas Johnson. That set up a rematch between Doles and Jeff West's Keaton Shelman.

The two met in the third-place match at regionals the week before, with Doles winning 3-1 in overtime.

It was the same score, but different result, as Shelman got a late takedown in the third period to end Doles' hopes of a medal.



Louisburg senior Brandon Doles scrambles to try and get a reversal late in his consolation quarterfinal match.

“Brandon’s final match was heart-breaking for us all, most of all him,” Bovaird said. “He’s overcome so much – losing his entire junior season to his broken leg from football and missing more than half of his senior season to that nagging shoulder injury. When I think about the determination, courage, and focus he showed by getting back in as good a wrestling shape as he possibly could, getting recertified after getting cleared to return to the mat, and battling it out with kids who’d already wrestled in 30-plus matches this season, I’m so proud of him.

“He nearly got in the back side of the bracket to earn a state medal. I think a fully healthy Brandon Doles with a full senior season would have been right there in contention for a state medal. The majority of wrestlers coming back from that much time away from competition would have struggled to get as far as Brandon did.”

Freshman Ashton Moore put together two strong showings in his state matches, but lost a 7-4 decision to El Dorado's Terek White and was pinned by McPherson's Jase Fitzmorris in the first round of consolation.

"Ashton had a great season as a freshman in an upper-middle weight class," Bovaird said. "He was one win shy of hitting the 30-win mark this season, too. He's shown that he's a coachable kid who can get physical when he needs to and can exercise some mental discipline that is pretty uncanny for someone his age. Throw in the fact that he's been battling at practice with teammate Brayden Yoder all season. Those two, once we get them in separate weight classes, will be scoring a lot of points for the program the next three years."