

Wildcats pull together to defeat Ottawa on Senior Night



Louisburg senior Elijah Eslinger gets a pin Thursday to give the Wildcats a 39-36 win over Ottawa on Senior Night at Louisburg High School.

Out two starters and down double digits at home to Ottawa on Senior Night, there was a little unknown if Louisburg could pull out a dual win over the Cyclones.

On one of the more important nights of the year, the Wildcats came through. Louisburg won five of the last seven matches, and even the ones it didn't get a victory, prevented the Cyclones from getting some key points in a 39-36 Louisburg win.

Louisburg sophomores Greysen Dixon (126 pounds) and Jonas Briley (157) were filling in for starters J'Lee Collins and Jay McCaskill, who were out. Although Dixon was pinned in his match, Briley came through with a pin to keep the Wildcats in it.

Then against difficult opponents, senior Jesse Murphy (144) and freshman Vance Hahn (165) made things tough as they lost by decision, allowing only three points to Ottawa in each match.

"Two key starters being out left us in a little bit of a situation, but I think we're in a spot with our program where the next man up can step out and do their part for the team,"

Louisburg coach Bobby Bovaird said. "J'Lee has been sick, so Greysen Dixon stepped up and filled in. Going into the third period, he was looking good and was only trailing 4-8 when he got caught on his back. Jay banged up his knee at Blue Valley Northwest, so sophomore Jonas Briley bumped up and filled in at 157. Coach Crossley and I have worked with Jonas since he was a little kid, so we knew that his grit and intensity would help him in that match, and it definitely paid off for us when he got the pin.



Sophomore Jonas Briley tries to throw his opponent during his 157-pound match.

"Two others really stepped up and went above and beyond – freshman Vance Hahn dropped a decision at 165 and senior Jesse Murphy lost by decision at 144, both of them against pretty strong opponents. We'd talked about 'bonus points' before the dual and how it's important to fight off your back in a dual. The guys have really bought into the team aspect of high school wrestling."

Louisburg won six other matches on the night as Will Showalter (106), Kaven Bartlett (138) and Brayden Yoder (190) each won

by pin, while Ashton Moore won by decision at 175 pounds. Hayden Heffernon (113) also had a bye to give the Wildcats six points.

All that set things up for senior Elijah Eslinger. With the Wildcats down three points going into the final match, the Louisburg heavyweight recorded a quick first period pin to give his team a 3-point win.

“With Elijah being our closer, it’s a great way to wrap up a dual,” Bovaird said. “Look at what he went through as a freshman – weighing 225 pounds and going up against upperclassmen who weighed all of 285 pounds. He took his lumps that year, and then as a sophomore he figured out a few things. Now, he’s focused, disciplined, and reliable. I love having a team leader like him to be our anchor.”



Senior Jesse Murphy tries for some back points at 144 pounds Thursday against Ottawa.

It all made for a memorable Senior Night that saw the Wildcat program honor their 11 seniors and their parents. Kaven Bartlett, Kaleb Carter, Elijah Eslinger, Trace Eslinger,

Brecon Klugman, Cameron McClellan, Jesse Murphy, Kyle Oram, Aidan Robinson, Grant Strubbe and Luke York all saw their final home competition.

The senior group started small, but more than doubled in size three years ago.

“The dedication of these seniors has been outstanding, and I’m so proud that we were able to get a team victory on Senior Night,” Bovaird said. “That was one of the objectives we talked about before the dual – sending our seniors off on a high note. This would be their last chance to compete in our home gym, and it’s important to make a statement at home like that in front of family and friends.

“While we have a large group of seniors, there’s only a handful that’s been out all four years – Kaven Bartlett, Elijah Eslinger, Trace Eslinger, Jesse Murphy, and Luke York. The others joined the program as sophomores and stuck with it. That’s probably the thing I’m most proud of. These guys have all bought into what the sport of wrestling can offer. They stayed committed to the program and I know they’ll be reaping the benefits down the road from what they’ve learned from wrestling.”



Senior Kaven Bartlett pinned his opponent Thursday during Senior Night.

The Wildcats will continue their difficult schedule Saturday as they compete in the Baldwin Invitational. Matches begin at 9 a.m.

"I'm definitely excited for the challenges of Baldwin this weekend," Bovaird said. "There are some teams we don't see very often before state – Goodland, Jeff West, Wamego and Rock Creek. We'll get a lot of head-to-head matches against strong kids. It'll be a great litmus test to see what we need to polish up on before league, regionals and state."