

Thompson, Nienhaus, Johnson to represent NUA at state wrestling tourney

Travis Rosenau

ST. PAUL - One return, one revenge tour and one debut.

That's the case for three New Ulm Area wrestlers competing in this weekend's State Individual Wrestling Tournament at Xcel Energy Center.

Senior heavyweight Evan Thompson (41-4) will be returning for the second consecutive season after taking home a Class AA sixth-place state medal last year. Senior 145-pounder Winsten Nienhaus will be making his first trip to state, but it could have easily been his second year in a row also if not for injuries.

And finally, one NUA 114-pound wrestler Kane Johnson will round out his freshman season with his first state appearance.

All three wrestlers finished second at the Section 3AA tourney this past Saturday in Windom to qualify for the state tournament.

After dropping a fifth-place state heavyweight match to Detroit Lakes' Jeffrey Moen by a 6-1 decision last year, Thompson took home a sixth-place medal. This year, he's aiming higher.

"Obviously I just want to go there, do better than I did last year," Thompson said. "Looking at the brackets now, I think I have a real shot at finishing high on the podium. My goal going into the year was to be in the state finals and right now it looks pretty good."

Thompson took on an all-too-familiar foe this past Saturday at the section tourney in United's Brady Rhode. Rhode and Thompson both earned a decision over each other in the 2023-24 regular season, but they met again in the first-place match at the section tourney, with Rhode getting the best of Thompson in a 5-2 decision.

Thompson admitted his biggest bad habit to break this weekend at state will be shaking off his fears.

"Big matches, a higher opponent, I go in there almost scared," Thompson said. "I wrestle very cautiously, and I need to get rid of that."

If Thompson can be mentally prepared this weekend, he should have all the tools needed to take home another state medal. Thompson, the No. 4 seed, will open his time at state this Friday with a match against Rockford senior Nathan Woodward (24-9).

For Nienhaus, this year's trip to state meant validation and vindication. While Nienhaus put together a strong season last year and looked well on his way to the state tournament, injuries derailed the rest of his season and he was unable to even compete in the section tournament, finishing the season with a 33-9 record.

Despite dropping a first-place section match this past Saturday to United's Kameron Sather, Nienhaus didn't have to wrestle a true second match as he defeated Marshall's Drew Chandler 7-1 earlier. Chandler ended up winning his way through the consolation bracket after and took third, but Nienhaus's earlier win over Chandler canceled out the true second match.

"It was kind of just a sigh of relief," Nienhaus said. "I really wish I would have won that match, I was still a little . Then Briggs told me I didn't have a true second match, so I was not tired, but I could be relaxed a little more and just get in the mindset that I can chill for a little bit and just get ready to go watch my teammates make their attempts for the state tournament. It's kind of a revenge tour we're trying to make here."

Nienhaus is 42-6 this season and will take on Roseau eighth-grader Seth Cossentine (39-7) in the first round Friday.

Nienhaus said he's looking to stay aggressive at state.

"I wrestled kind of hesitant in my championship match, I think, at sections," Nienhaus said. "So just going out there, every match could be my last from now on."

Nienhaus said he is looking to do everything he can to make his team proud and place.

"I'm trying to be on top of that podium, the ultimate goal," Nienhaus said. "But I'd be OK placing, just showing New Ulm proud. I've been wrestling for how many years, and it would just be a big accomplishment - even getting there, and then placing is just another step."

Kane Johnson, NUA's other state wrestler, has wrestled in big tournaments before, but none quite as big. Last year, he went 3-0 at the Ninth Grade League Team State Competition as an eighth-grader.

This year, he's stepping onto the mats at Xcel Energy Center.

"I was the one seed going into sections, so I was already kind of thinking, I had a plan going into it," he said. "Had a plan going into and it ."

Kane Johnson dropped a first-place match to Windom/Mountain Lake Area's Preston Xayachak by a 4-1 decision at the section meet, but he earned a true second match where he defeated Gavin Mortenson 1-0 to finish second and

qualify for state.

Kane Johnson (29-10) will first wrestle Minneapolis Patrick Henry senior Adam Her (25-9).

"In practice lately, I've been trying to do more on my feet," Kane Johnson said. "I've been kind of slow at that recently. But just my feet wrestling and angles."

Kane Johnson said his first season goal was getting to the state tournament. Now that he's competing there, he'd like to place but realizes there are 15 other wrestlers besides him in his bracket with the same goals.

"There's obviously a goal to place, but if it's out of reach, I'd just like to win a match," he said. "And just being there is a big , too."

ALSO FROM THE AREA

Wabasso will be sending two wrestlers to state on Friday, with junior Kaysen Harms making his second state appearance and sophomore Zeke Olson making his first.

Harms (33-13) won a true second match this past weekend at the Section 3A tourney in Pipestone.

"He had a tough stretch in January where he wrestled nine state-tournament entrants in a row," Wabasso head coach Cole Cooreman said of Harms. "It strengthened him for the postseason run."

Harms also earned his 100th career win and 75th career pin this season and has 23 pins on the year. The Rabbits team captain will take on another area wrestler in his first-round 133-pound match in Sibley East's Benito Diaz (37-2), the No. 2 seed at state.

Olson (34-7) has 26 pins on the year and will make his state debut at 189 pounds Friday.

"Zeke was the 6 seed at sections and battled through a tough 189-pound bracket," Cooreman said. "He had an exciting match in the finals but came up a little short, finishing as the runner-up. Zeke started his wrestling career a little later than most as a sixth-grader and has been working extremely hard ever since."

Olson, another team captain, also picked up his 60th win this season and is closing in on 50 pins for his career.

Olson will take on Staple/Motley's Luke Bjerga in the first round, who is the No. 7 seed and 37-10 on the season.

Sibley East will have two additional wrestlers heading to state with Diaz this year in Tanner Johnson (114) and Julio Alejandro (127).

Diaz (133), who took home a Class A fifth-place medal at state last season as a sophomore at 120, returns to state for the third year in a row. This season, Diaz holds a 37-2 record and will first take on Wabasso's Kaysen Harms.

Sibley East Wolverines head coach Chris Koob said Diaz has done what a veteran can do this season.

"Came out and wrestled his best and wasn't flashy, just consistent from start to finish in each match," Koob said of Diaz. "He's sitting in a great spot to make a deep run if he wrestles like he did this weekend. He uses his strength for the weight class he will be in the mix."

Tanner Johnson, a 24-22 freshman, will be making his first trip to state for the Wolverines.

Koob said Tanner Johnson has continued to improve this season.

" has made big improvements in the last couple of years," Koob said. "He wrestled a great section tournament. It was fun to see him rewarded and excited to see how this accomplishment jump-starts his future."

Tanner Johnson will first wrestle Badger/Greenbush-Middle River freshman Keegan VonEnde (30-8) on Friday.

Alejandro is a 24-9 freshman that will be making his first state trip at 127 pounds.

"His section tournament was about exercising demons from the past after a couple tough losses in past sections and then in the semis beating a kid he lost to five weeks ago," Koob said of Alejandro. "He executed his game plan great and can do some damage in his first state tournament."

Alejandro has a tough opening draw as he will first take on unbeaten senior out of Mille Lacs in Donovan Schmid (42-0).

Last but not least, the Lake Crystal Wellcome Memorial Area wrestling team will have a busy week, starting on Thursday as the entire team qualified for the Class A state team tournament.

They will open the tourney as the No. 4 seed and wrestle No. 5-seeded Jackson County Central at Xcel Energy Center at 11 a.m. Thursday.

While the team qualified on Feb. 17 with a 63-2 over Westfield in the Section 2A Championship, LCWMA also qualified 10 wrestlers over this past weekend to the Class A state individual tourney.

Those individuals were Brody Herbst (107), Ryder Antony (114), Griffin Gimenez (121), Carson Othoudt (127), Parker Kamm (133), Zach Palmer (139), Talan Osborne (145), Ryan Palmer (152), Nick Slater (189) and Mason Adams (215).

Herbst (36-12) will first take on Kaden Lasnetski (40-6) of Minneota, while Antony (25-18) first matches up with Pipestone's Miklo Hernandez (36-2).

In the individual portion of the tourney which begins Friday morning, Gimenez (24-8) will first take on Kenyon-Wanamingo's Reed Sommer (35-10), while Othoudt (26-18) faces West Central Area's Owen Gruchow (40-6), Kamm (28-8) wrestles Goodhue's Hayden Holm (27-10), Zach Palmer (32-14) wrestles Trinity School at River Ridge's Dominic McNamara (25-12) and Osborne (28-21) wrestles JCC's Nolan Ambrose (50-1). Finally for LCWMA, Ryan Palmer (37-8) will first wrestle Menahga's Zach Davidson (25-10), while Slater (44-5) wrestles Frazee's Jack Graham (27-16) and Adams (32-13) wrestles New York Mills' Bode Roberts (34-3).

The individual tournament begins at 9 a.m. Friday morning with Class A action. Class AA wrestling will follow Class A wrestling, while Class AAA will round out each day. The individual tourney wraps up Saturday evening.

