

Tanager wrestlers claim Region 2A crown in spectacular fashion

By Parker Knox
Sportswriter

So far as championships are concerned, it matters only how you finish. For Vermillion's wrestling program, which has seen regional team titles slip away by the barest of margins in recent seasons, the finish of the Region 2A Tournament couldn't have been any more spectacular.

Heading into the final night at Brandon Friday, the Tanagers trailed Yankton by 137-129. "Our plan," said Coach Joe Delvaux later, "was to try to overlook the team title and let things fall where they may, but we would wrestle with a lot of heart."

But as the evening wore on, the Tanagers, who still were behind the Bucks by 160-149 as the championship and third-place matches began, found it difficult to forget about the team title even though the main order of business was qualifying for state.

Six Vermillion wrestlers had already done that Thursday by reaching the finals. Seven more had the chance to qualify on Friday, and four of them did, giving the Tanagers a squad of 10 beginning action at the state "A" tournament in Rapid City Friday morning.

VHS had 13 men with the potential to add to the team's point total as the final session commenced, and Yankton had 10. While the Bucks lost all of their first four matches and their point total stayed stuck on 160, T.J. North's title at 112 pounds lifted the Tanagers to within 160-155, gaining four team points for his championship and two more for scoring a pin.

Yankton's fortunes took an upswing at 135 and 140 when Jake Dempsey and Gabe Messler won championships. In the latter class Earl Kiertzner won third for VHS, but the spread was now 11 for the Bucks, 169-158. It stayed that way through the next three weight classes, so only four pairs of matches remained for the Tanagers to create their

magic. The status of things was no secret because the public address announcer updated the team scores regularly, and each time Yankton remained ahead.

But when a team has a top-seeded wrestler who has lost only twice all year going for it as VHS did in Chris Mart at 171, it has a distinct advantage. To make things even better, it was a head-to-head face-off with Yankton. Mart led 5-0 after one period, 11-2 after two and rolled the Bucks' Iden Ramey by a technical fall, 18-3. The Tanager star had not only gained four points for his team through his win but 1.5 more with his tech fall.

The Bucks' lead had shrunk to 169-163.5.

If they hadn't felt the Tanagers' breaths on their backs up to this point, they did now as top-rated, unbeaten Nick Mart took to the mat at 189. Bucks fans could only watch because they had no men still alive in this weight class. Mart did his thing, winning 6-2 over Austin Lynde of Lennox, adding four points to the VHS total. It was now 169-167.5.

Yankton had nobody available to earn points at 215, but the Tanagers had Gerrit Heine. His battle with Harrisburg's Nate Flanders was an agonizingly close and subject to change at any point. Heine scored a pair of escapes in their second period to lead 2-0. Flanders got one of his own in the third, but the VHS senior held on for a 2-1 win, sliding his team past Yankton and into the lead, 171.5-169.

Yet at heavyweight the third-place match between Tanager sophomore Will Mart and Yankton senior Brice Saylor, boasting a 27-5 record, would decide which team would be regional champs. A Saylor victory would give the Bucks 172 points, one-half point more than Vermillion, but a Mart victory would clinch it for the Tanagers.

Accustomed to going at it with much heavier wrestlers all season long in the heavy-

weight class, Mart found it no surprise to face Saylor, weighing something like 40 pounds more than Mart. But quickness, a ton of heart, and the wrestling savvy he has learned from his three senior brothers paid off.

With his entire team lining one side of the mat and urging him on, Mart scored a crucial escape to get the lead over Saylor. But early in the third period the match was tied 1-1. The regional title decision was not only going down to the last match but down to the very last minute.

Having worn down the heavier Saylor for 5 1/2 minutes, Mart seized the opportunity for an exhilarating takedown with 35 seconds left to go up 3-1. Saylor earned an escape to cut the gap to 3-2, but Mart polished him off with another takedown with 10 seconds left. Mart's 5-2 win left the Tanagers with 174.5 points and the Region 2A championship.

Vermillion headed west yesterday with, as Delvaux put it, "nothing to lose" as they venture into the home lair of the state's two Class "A" powers, Sturgis and Rapid City Stevens. "Each one of our kids has a legitimate chance to place there," their coach added.

A look at each of the Tanager state tourney competitors:

103: Brett Bye

The VHS seventh grader opened with a 10-3 win over West Central's Cole Furrel, then lost in the semis to Lincoln's Ryan O'Connor on a 2-09 pin. In his wrestling match to decide whether he would go to state or stay home, Bye, leading 1-0, scored the key takedown in the very last second of the second period and held on to that lead for a 3-1 win over Casey Skillingstad of Yankton. Bye, now 28-10, then lost the third-place match, 8-4, to Adam Presler, Brandon Valley.

112: T.J. North

The state's top-rated 112-pounder takes a 27-0 record to state after dominating Washington's Josh Barkema in the semis and pined Yankton's Matt Huber in 5:17 in the finals. North, a senior, led Huber 8-2 after two periods but rolled him over with a minute left and scored the pin and earning



Members of the Vermillion Tanager wrestling team celebrate after claiming the Region 2A crown last Friday in Brandon. The Vermillion grapplers began competing in the State A tournament in Rapid City today. (Submitted photo)

crucial team points in the process.

135: Lance Burkhardt

Top-seeded in the regional and ranked fourth in the state rankings, Burkhardt won 4-3 over Harrisburg's Jacob Devine in the semis. His championship foe was Yankton's Dempsey, rated fifth. Burkhardt won the first time they met this season. This time it was a tough overtime loss for Burkhardt, 5-3. The Tanager junior had trailed 3-1 with a minute left but scored an escape with 45 seconds left and the tying escape at 0:07 of the third period to force overtime where Dempsey got the initial sudden-death takedown. Burkhardt's record is a gaudy 26-6.

140: Earl Kiertzner

Senior Kiertzner showed what he is made of by competing at 140 although he held down the 130-pound slot for VHS all season. He won his first-round in a 5:27 pin over Brandon Pennock, West Central, but in the semifinals he was outscored by Yankton's Messler, rated sixth in the state, 17-12. On Friday, however, Kiertzner proved that the decision to move up to 140 wasn't wrong after all. Facing Harrisburg's Alex Oaks, No. 8 in the state, Kiertzner earned a 3-3 tie with a takedown with 1:31 left in the match. He fell behind 6-3, however, and a state tourney trip appeared to be slipping away until he scored an escape with 37 seconds left. Then he got the best of Oaks, throwing him to the mat for a tying takedown and held on while watching the clock away, knowing he would have three near-fall points waiting at the buzzer. Kiertzner polished off his act and improved his record to 28-8 with a 4-1 win over the region's top seed, Dan DeVaney of Washington, in the third-place match, sealing the deal with a takedown at 0:07.

145: Bennet Johnson

One of the Tanagers' feel-good stories is Johnson, competing in his first regional tourney and his first full year of wrestling, even though he is a senior. Though he lost in the first round to Mitchell Schenk, Harrisburg, 6-2, Johnson rallied impressively, first taking out Brandon Valley's Calvin Ode, 12-1,

to stay alive. In the match he had to win to go to state, Johnson pulled out all the stops, taking down Yankton's Jason Stuen in the second period, adding a clinching takedown with 1:02 left and winning 5-4. Johnson, now 24-14, faced Schenk again for third place and lost 5-4.

160: Tanner Mart

One of the Tanagers' senior triplets, Tanner goes to Rapid City with a 14-3 record. He likely would be going as regional champion, too, if it were not for the fact that he had to face the state's No. 1 160-pounder, unbeaten Tim Weber of West Central, in the finals. Mart led 5-4 after two periods, but Weber escaped with a 7-5 win. Earlier Mart pinned Garrett VanMeyer of Tea Area in 54 seconds and defeated Lincoln's Zach Berkelo 9-2.

171: Chris Mart

Chris goes to state with a 29-2 record after a spectacular regional. He pinned Dylan Klinghagen, Lennox, in 1:59; pinned Garrett Bratland, Brandon Valley, in 1:36, and won his tech fall in the finals over Ramey, 18-3.

189: Nick Mart

A man can't be any better than unbeaten at 35-0 and top-ranked. Nick pinned Austin Semmler of Washington in 56 seconds, won in the semis by injury default over West Central's Michael Jensen and won his 6-2 match from Lynde in the finals.

215: Gerrit Heine

Yet another talented senior, Heine takes a 27-3 record to state. He punished Tanner Husman, Lennox, 11-0 in his opener; won in the semis 5-2 over Michael Kappenman, West Central, and won his 2-1 nailbiter from Flanders in the finals.

285: Will Mart

Prior to his 4-3 win over Saylor for third, Will won by major decision, 18-8, over Washington's Doug Cordell, in the quarters and lost in the semis in a 2:58 pin by top-seeded Taylor Harris of Harrisburg. To qualify for state, Mart had to beat

Brandon Valley's Dylan Treloar. Will scored an escape early in the second period and a takedown seven seconds from the buzzer to lead 3-0. A takedown early in the third gave him a 5-0 lead, and he controlled the action the rest of the way to get to the third-place match. Will's record is 27-8.

Other Wrestlers

At 119 seventh-grader Regan Bye finishes the year at 12-19 after losing by pin in 1:19 to Drew Brown, Harrisburg, in the quarters and by 11-2 to Ryan Lammers, Yankton, in the wrestlebacks.

Tony Henderson's junior season at 125 ends at 3-19 after a pair of pins, in 1:11 to Andy Jorgenson, Tea Area, and in 4:09 to Cody Miller, West Central.

Sophomore Brenden Raizola, who had wrestled only seven varsity matches all year, took the 130-pound slot vacated by Kiertzner. He lost on a first-round pin in 3:03 to Lincoln's Miles Seten and was pinned in the wrestlebacks by Ben Fuhr, Harrisburg, in 2:58. Raizola's final record is 4-5.

At 152 junior Andrew McCann finishes at 6-26. He lost 13-9 in the quarters to Jamie Carmichael, Washington, but then stayed alive with an exciting 1:28 pin over Aaron Fowler, Tea Area. McCann lost in the final wrestleback, however, 5-2 to Yankton's Brock Woehl.

Wrestling Notes

The Tanagers placed 10th as a team at state in 2009 with 57.5 points. North had the best Vermillion finish with a third at 112 pounds. Other placers were Andrew Eidem and Heine, fifth; Burkhardt, seventh, and Chris Mart, eighth. Kiertzner, Will Mart, Brad Orr and J.R. Moore were also qualifiers last year.

The Tanagers' first-round opponents at state can be accessed on the wrestling homepage at www.sdhsaa.com. Saturday's final session at the "A" tourney can be viewed online at www.sdpb.org.

Tanager gymnasts improve performance at state tourney

By Parker Knox
Sportswriter

Another season of learning and growing for Vermillion High's young gymnastics team ended at the state tournament in Aberdeen last weekend, and the Tanagers placed ninth in the Class "A" team competition.

In addition, their two junior leaders, Amber Walker and Elly Melby, set the stage for an even better senior year by placing 15th and 16th, respectively, in the individual all-around competition.

Coach Mark Upward was excited after Friday's competition when his girls' score of 124.814 was posted. That is 13 points better than last year's state meet with the same girls competing. Upward said the floor exercise event got the team off to a good start. On the parallel bars where the Tanagers have struggled this season, he said "we were pretty solid." Even in the bars event, Vermillion's season-long nemesis, "we came out of it the best we have done all year."

If next year's team is identical to this year's as anticipated, Walker and Melby as seniors will be joined by one junior, four sophomores, and two eighth graders among the girls who competed for VHS at the state meet.

Madison won its 16th straight "A" team crown with a 141.927 score, but Deuel High of Clear Lake was a close second at 139.810. The Tanager duo's all-around scores on Friday were 32.483 for

Walker and 34.050 for Melby. Vermillion's scores in the team competition were:

Bars: Melby 7.850, Walker 7.633, freshman Morgan Hower 6.333, freshman Grace Olson 5.900, seventh grader Teddi Settles 1.766.

Beam: Melby 8.650, Walker 8.200, freshman Rory Tucker 8.150, freshman Jade Fostvedt 6.783, sophomore Christine Epping 6.383.

Floor exercise: Melby 8.800, Walker 8.450, Tucker 7.783, Fostvedt 7.683, Epping 7.483.

Vault: Melby 8.750, Walker 8.200, Epping 7.966, Hower 7.683, seventh grader Jamie Moos 7.383.

For Saturday's individual

competition Walker's 33.250 for 15th place averaged out from 19th place at 7.650 on bars, a tie for 10th at 8.600 on beam, 28th place at 8.350 in floor and 21st at 8.650 in vault. Melby, right behind at 33.232, earned 16th place at 7.750 on bars, a tie for 24th at 8.016 on beam, 18th at 8.750 on floor and 14th at 8.716 in vault.

The other Vermillion qualifier for Saturday's individual events, Fostvedt on the beam, placed 45th with a score of 6.5830.

Next year's state tournament will be held at the Huron Arena.

VHS bowlers travel to Hartford Area

The VHS bowling team recently traveled to Hartford and bowled at Ten Pin Alley on Feb. 19. The Vermillion girls defeated Hartford Area 47 to 3 and the Vermillion boys defeated Hartford Area 36 to 14.

VHS results against Hartford Area:

Girls' high game was Jennifer Jurgenson with a 224 and 178, and Jeanette Conway with a 193. Boys' high game was Michael Brunick with a 223 and 191, and Matthew Moore with a 197.

The VHS bowling team will be traveling to Brookings on Feb. 26 for the state tournament. Good luck bowlers.

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