

H-F boys wrestling finishes best season in school history

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Homewood-Flossmoor High School wrestling wrapped up the most successful season in program history Feb. 19 with four of five state qualifiers standing on the podium at the State Farm Center in Champaign.

Coach Jim Sokoloski said he didn't realize the impact of the season until just before the state tournament, when H-F wrestling alumni began to contact him and congratulate the team. It's the first time in program history that five Vikings qualified for state. Homewood-Flossmoor had never before had more than two state placers in the same season.

"There's no question that this was the best season in history, but I cannot stress enough that we're not satisfied with that," Sokoloski said. "The goal is to win state titles as individuals and as a team. We're going to keep pushing. I'm so proud of these guys and what they were able to accomplish, but this is just the tip of the iceberg."

The Vikings did it by avenging losses early in the brackets, overcoming injuries and fighting through a few stalling penalties the team didn't feel were fair.

Junior Vincent Robinson was five points shy of a ring. He lost 10-5 to Mount Carmel's Sergio Lemley in the 126-pound final. Robinson was called twice for stalling in the third period.

The two have a history, with Robinson dealing Lemley his only loss of the season during the Walsh Iron Man event in Ohio. That match went into sudden victory.

Lemley (40-1) was the 106-pound state champ two years ago and won a 120-pound title wrestling for Chesterton in Indiana last season.

"I definitely felt that he was coming for me. I was his only loss on the season so I know for most of the year he was only tracking me. He had nobody else to worry about," Robinson said. "He definitely had a better game plan (this time)."

Robinson, a North Carolina State recruit, finishes his season 32-3. He's the fourth second-place finisher in school history and the first to stand that high on the podium since Jeff Griffin in 2018. No Viking has ever won a state championship.

"I've got something more to prove," Robinson said. "This is just going to fuel my fire, make me wrestle harder than anybody."

Robinson's brother Jaydon won in sudden victory 6-4 over Fremd's Char-



Provided photo

The Homewood-Flossmoor High School boys wrestling team took top honors in state championship. It was the first time in school history that five H-F wrestlers qualified for state. Congratulating the team are, from left, Superintendent-Elect Scott Wakely; Athletic Director Matt Lyke; team members Vincent Robinson, Haku Watson-Castro, Deion Johnson, Head Wrestling Coach Jim Sokoloski, Jaydon Robinson, Justin Thomas; Superintendent Von Mansfield.

lie Fifield in the 145-pound third-place match. Earlier in the day, Jaydon Robinson was pinned in the third period of the semifinal by Tommy Curran of DeKalb.

In the third-place match, Jaydon Robinson said he feigned fatigue by putting his hands on his knees so that Fifield could see. He saw his opponent relax enough to do the same and knew the match was his.

He went for the takedown with about 10 seconds on the clock, got it and sealed the victory.

"I was just pushing it. I caught my second breath and started moving my feet. He came back up and I shot again," Robinson said.

Both brothers had the same reaction when asked if they would've been happy with this result at the beginning of the season.

"I would have told you to get out of my face," Jaydon Robinson said. "When I stood on that podium, I told myself 'Next year, I'm going to be (two steps higher).' I know for sure that nobody in the state can beat me."

Deion Johnson had perhaps the most eventful day.

He opened the 106-pound bracket with a 19-6 major decision over Marist's George Marinopoulos, then won a 9-7 match over Mt. Prospect's Joel Muehlenbeck.

A second period injury cost Johnson

his semifinal match against Seth Mendoza of Mt. Carmel. His arm was pinned under him and injury time ran out while he talked with trainers. He returned to the mat to beat Schaumburg's Brady Phelps 4-1 in the semifinal.

The third-place match with Batavia's Ino Garcia after that was a thriller. Three periods ended with the scoreboard at 6-6. Neither scored in two overtimes.

Johnson got the point in the ultimate tie breaker period to win 7-6.

"I had to ride him out to get this third place," Johnson said. "I doubted myself a little bit in that match but when I finally pulled through, it just felt good."

Johnson's season included several good finishes in major tournaments. He'll try to gain some weight and wrestle against the best in the country this spring and summer.

"I proved a lot to myself this season," he said.

In his final state series, senior Justin Thomas was third at 220 pounds.

He lost 11-9 in sudden victory to Hersey's Meny Mejia in the second round. Thomas and Sokoloski spent some time talking after that match. The coach consoled a wrestler who knew it would now be impossible to win a state championship.

"He had to deal with that. I said 'Your goals change now. You can't be a state champ now. Are you going to let that

ruin the rest of your tournament and end your season?'" Sokoloski said. "I said 'I guarantee if you wrestle back to that third-place match, you're going to see (Mejia) again, and that'll be the one that matters.'"

Sokoloski was right. Thomas eked out wins in the next two matches before beating Marko Ivanisevic from Hinsdale Central 15-7 to set up a rematch with Mejia for third place.

Thomas, who signed to play football at the University of Indianapolis and may also wrestle in college, gutted out a 12-10 win in the rematch.

"Every year in the state tournament, there's a kid like Justin who loses and has to win four or five matches to get third. That's no small feat," Sokoloski said. "You've got to give him credit. He went out there and really showed the kind of character and greatness he has as a human being."

Haku Watson-Castro, the fifth qualifier, lost in the first consolation round of the 182-pound bracket.

The Vikings will bring back four of the five for the 2022-23 season. The incoming freshman class is promising, as well, Sokoloski said. Sights are set even higher for next winter.

"We wanted bracket boards. We went there to win bracket boards," Sokoloski said. "That's what's going to motivate us moving forward."