

4 Metro wrestlers eye state titles

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 21 February 2014 23:08 -

DES MOINES - The Linn-Mar Lions and Prairie Hawks have staged a friendly battle for bragging rights in Metro wrestling for a number of years, usually taking turns at the top.

They'll settle this year's tussle at the Class 3A state tournament in Des Moines Saturday night.

Both Linn-Mar and Prairie will have two experienced grapplers in the championship round - although not against each other - and the results of those four matches could determine who finishes higher in the team standings.

The Lions enter the final day of the state tournament in fourth place with 73.5 points. The Hawks enter the final day in fifth place with 67 points, within striking distance.

Alijah Jeffery (120) and Andrew Holladay (195) will be going for the gold for Linn-Mar. Trey Blaha (152) and Skyler St. John (160) are in the finals for Prairie.

Linn-Mar had its share of disappointments Friday night in the semifinals as top-ranked Ross Lembeck (152) and seventh-ranked Damon Griffin (126) both lost their matches. Overall, the Lions compiled a 3-3 record Friday night in the semis and consolation matches.

On the hand, Prairie went 4-for-4 Friday night with two victories in the semifinals and two more victories in the wrestle-backs with Sam Uthoff (120) and Josh Wenger (138) still in the hunt for third place.

Blaha won his match at 152 and St. John followed suit a few minutes later at 160. Both Hawks won their matches, 5-1.

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"I'll tell you what, they both wrestled tough," said Prairie Coach Blake Williams. "It's like we've said: You have to wrestle your match and wrestle with confidence out there, and they were.

"It's great," said Williams, "because both of these guys were so so close to the finals last year and both lost heart-breakers in the semis. So for them to do this as seniors, it's great. They're one step closer. One more step would be big for those two and we could go out with a bang with both of them."

Blaha finished fourth at 138 pounds last year after falling in the semifinals. He placed sixth at 126 pounds in 2012 as a sophomore and hopes to finish his prep career as a state champion.

Blaha has never forgotten what it felt like to lose a tight match in the semifinals last year and to entirely miss making the state tournament as a ninth grader.

"It's been motivation," he said. "Freshman year, I was one point away from making it to state. That's a day I remember every year, what it felt like sitting at home and watching all my teammates compete and not being able to compete out there when I knew I should have been."

St. John had a serious bout with the flu at the state tournament last year and needed three IV injections, one Friday morning at Wells Fargo Arena and two more at a Des Moines hospital between sessions. He ended up placing fifth, but now he's got a chance to finish on top.

"It's always good to win. It's where you want to be," he said. "One more left. I've got to finish it."

Jeffery subdued Nolan Hellickson of Southeast Polk, 4-1, in triple-overtime to reach the finals at 120 pounds. Jeffery has finished 5th, 3rd and 3rd at the last three state tournaments and will end his career with his best showing in Des Moines.

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Jeffery went for a run along the streets in downtown Des Moines after his match, getting himself physically and mentally prepared for the finals Saturday night.

Griffin had his hands full in the 126-pound semifinals against top-ranked Kaz Onoo of Mason City and lost, 5-0. Ross Lembeck, hoping to finish his career as the 152-pound champ, had trouble mounting an offense in the semifinals and lost to third-ranked Travis Willers of Pleasant Valley, 4-3.

Holladay, waiting for his semifinal at 195, was disappointed to see Lembeck fall short and suffer his only defeat of the season, but knew he couldn't let his teammate's disappointment affect his own performance. "It just makes me go harder, if anything, knowing that we need the team points to stay in the race," he said.

The Xavier Saints sent two grapplers to the semifinals, but Clint Lembeck got pinned at 132 pounds and Nick Drahozal dropped a 2-1 verdict at 145. Cole Turner saved the night for the Saints by winning his consolation match at 285 by a 5-3 count in overtime.

Brenden Baker (106) of Jefferson, Nolan Hrmidko (113) of Kennedy and Matt Wempen (132) of Linn-Mar won their consolation matches Friday night and can place third on Saturday. Hrmidko, Griffin, Ross Lembeck, Clint Lembeck, Nick Drahozal, Uthoff, Wenger and Turner also can wrestle-back for third place.

Noah Ajram (113) of Linn-Mar and Kyle Briggs (120) of Jefferson lost in the consolation round Friday night and will be trying to finish seventh on Saturday.

[Friday's Class 3A Results](#)