

6 Metro wrestlers going for the gold

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - They've lived in hotel rooms since Tuesday night and have spent a major chunk of time at Wells Fargo Arena in downtown Des Moines, hoping and praying for a chance to wrestle for a state title before a huge crowd on Saturday night.

The time is here.

Six wrestlers from the Cedar Rapids Metro area will be in the spotlight Saturday night when they battle for individual titles at the 92nd annual state tournament.

Matt Wempen of Linn-Mar, Chris Walters of Cedar Rapids Prairie, Luke Kremer of Cedar Rapids Kennedy, Ross Lembeck of Linn-Mar, Zach Witte of Prairie and Mark Atwater of Linn-Mar have all reached the pinnacle of prep wrestling in Iowa.

One more match, one more victory and they'll climb to the top of the victory stand, something they've cherished since they were peewee wrestlers in grade school.

"It's a great feeling, a great crowd, our team is doing well. I can't ask for much more right now," said Atwater, the Linn-Mar football star who has proven he's an excellent wrestler as well. "I'd like to cap off my senior season with a state championship. It's something I've always dreamed of."

Linn-Mar is sitting in fourth place in the team standings heading into the final day with 101 points, just 1.5 markers behind Iowa City West in a tight battle for third. The Lions and Trojans both have three wrestlers in the finals, so it's up for grabs.

"We have to score more points," said Linn-Mar Coach Doug Streicher, putting it succinctly.

The Prairie Hawks are in fifth place in the standings and have a good chance to stay there, with

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two grapplers in the finals and an 11.5 point lead over Waverly-Shell Rock. One of those finalists is Witte, who will be bidding to become a two-time champion when he battles for the 152-pound crown.

Bettendorf and Southeast Polk are scrapping for the team championship, probably too far ahead and too powerful for anyone else to catch them on Saturday.

Witte claimed the 145-pound title last season and is looking to end his career with another trip to the top. He didn't get much sleep before the finals last year and anticipated another restless night in Des Moines Friday night.

"You're thinking a lot. I'll try to sleep good, but I doubt I will," he said.

Witte was sporting a minor shiner under his right eye and all sorts of cuts and bruises on his forehead. "I'm looking pretty cool," he said, smiling, proud of his battle scars.

The championship round is scheduled to begin at 6 p.m. Saturday with the Grand March and the finals in Class 3A, 2A and 1A. The finals will be televised in eastern Iowa by KCRG 9.2 (Mediacom 109, Imon 709).

The fun will start right away with Wempen (47-2) facing Travis Willers of Pleasant Valley (50-2) for top honors at 106 pounds, the lightest weight class in the tournament.

Walters (40-3) will meet Tyler Willers of Pleasant Valley (50-2) for the championship at 120 pounds. Kremer (39-5) has a formidable date with Dakota Bauer of Iowa City West (51-2) for bragging rights at 132 pounds.

Lembeck (48-2) faces undefeated Gabriel Moreno of Urbandale (40-0) for the 145-pound crown, then Witte (22-0) will meet Dylan Blackford of Southeast Polk (44-3) for bragging rights at 152 pounds.

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Atwater (31-3) will finish the Metro parade onto center stage when he tangles with undefeated Jared Bartel of Mason City (48-0) for honors at 182 pounds. There are 14 weight classes, and Metro wrestlers will be competing in six of them.

Kremer finished sixth in the state tournament in 2010 as a sophomore and placed third last year. He's clinched no worse than second place this season, but he won't be happy with that. "No, not at this point," he remarked.

Kremer trimmed Joel Northrup of Linn-Mar in the semifinals, 4-2, in overtime in an all-Metro battle that squared their season series at two wins apiece.

"Two great kids battling out there," noted Kennedy Coach Brent Paulson. "It's what the sport is all about."

Ten other Metro wrestlers will be competing in the wrestle-backs on Saturday, including nine grapplers who could finish as high as third place with two more victories.

The potential third-place finishers are Alijah Jeffery of Linn-Mar (113), Josh Wenger of Prairie (113), Trey Blaha of Prairie (126), Northrup of Linn-Mar (132), Cameron Rathje of Prairie (170), Mitch Wantock of Linn-Mar (170), A.J. Garcia of Linn-Mar (220), Andrew Netolicky of Prairie (220) and Tyler Burrell of Washington (285). Damon Griffin of Linn-Mar (120) will be wrestling for seventh place.