

Witte, Herman whip No. 1s to reach finals

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 18 February 2011 22:11 - Last Updated Saturday, 19 February 2011 16:34

DES MOINES -- Conner Herman could sing the national anthem before the state wrestling championships Saturday night if he had the time, but he's got more important things on his mind.

The Cedar Rapids Jefferson senior will be competing for the 3A state title at 215 pounds at Wells Fargo Arena. He's also a member of the Jefferson Show Choir when he's not wrestling, but he'll leave the singing to someone else this time.

Herman upset top-ranked Jesse South of Urbandale, 5-2, Friday night in the semifinals in his bid to become Jefferson's first state champion since 1998.

"According to the rankings, I wasn't supposed to beat him," said Herman, who is ranked fifth at 215. "I wasn't supposed to even be in the semifinals, according to the rankings. I am excited, because I'm where I'm not supposed to be."

Herman needs one more victory to give Jefferson its first state champion since Tim Ironside 13 years ago.

"It doesn't mean anything just to be in the finals," Herman insisted. "It means everything to win the finals."

Zach Witte of Prairie also upset a top-ranked wrestler in the semifinals and will join Herman in the Grand March Saturday night. Witte ran his record to 37-0 with a dramatic 5-1 overtime victory against Sioux City North's Chad Ryan, who won the Class 3A 130-pound title last year and was 47-1 before meeting Witte.

"I am so happy," said Witte. "After last year, losing in districts, to get to where I am now. I'm so glad I'm finally there."

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Witte was more aggressive than Ryan, but Ryan enjoyed a decided height advantage and countered everything Witte tried until the final seconds of overtime.

"It's definitely tough to wrestle a longer kid," said Witte. "Being so short, it makes it tough."

The match was tied, 1-1, after six minutes. Witte got a takedown and two-point nearfall to win it, then received a bearhug from Prairie Coach Blake Williams.

"What a great match," said Williams. "It's not often when the referee comes off and says, 'What a match. Two great wrestlers.'"

Witte will face Gabriel Moreno of Urbandale in the finals for the right to call himself the best Class 3A 145-pound wrestler in the state this year.

"This is something I've been looking forward to," Witte said between deep gasps, catching his breath.

Herman, meanwhile, will try to sing a happy tune against Ben Nagle of North Scott for the 215-pound championship. He has continued to compete in Show Choir competitions for Jefferson this winter while wrestling at a high level.

Herman competed in the J-Hawk Invitational this season, then hustled to Linn-Mar High School for a Show Choir event that night. And just last weekend, he won the district mat title in Waverly and made it to Benton Community High School that night for Show Choir.

Mondays are particularly demanding. He has wrestling practice after school, then Show Choir practice from 7 to 10 p.m.

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"It sort of helps me out to maintain my weight a little bit, because I'm not thinking about food there (at Show Choir). And I'm sweating there, too," said Herman, who has a 3.9 GPA.

Herman and Witte were the Metro headliners in Des Moines Friday night. Braxton Chicchelly (130) of Xavier, Mitch Wantock (171) of Linn-Mar, Ryan Sheldon (171) of Kennedy and Andrew Netolicky (189) of Prairie all lost in the semifinals and fell into consolation brackets.

Chicchelly dropped a contentious 9-6 verdict to Dakota Bauer of Iowa City West in the semifinals, with no love lost between either wrestler during or after the bout.

Wantock lost a 13-5 major decision to Willie Miklus of Southeast Polk in one 171-pound semifinal. Sheldon fell to Levi Peters of Fort Dodge, 7-1, in the other 171 semifinal.

Netolicky was blanked by Brandon Abernathy of Indianola, 4-0, in his semifinal bout.

Alijah Jeffery (103) of Linn-Mar, Luke Kremer (135) of Kennedy, Ross Lembeck (135) of Linn-Mar and Tyler Burrell (285) of Washington are alive in the wrestlebacks and will seek medals Saturday.

Jeffery, Chicchelly and Kremer will be wrestling for third place Saturday afternoon. Sheldon, Wantock, Netolicky and Burrell are vying for fifth place, while Lembeck is wrestling for seventh. Sheldon and Wantock will meet in the 171-pound match for fifth place.

Bettendorf leads the Clas 3A standings with 142 points, followed by Waverly-Shell Rock (137) and Iowa City West (129). Prairie has dropped to 12th place with 38 points, followed by Linn-Mar (15th), Kennedy (19th), Jefferson (25th), Xavier (31st) and Washington (39th).

[Complete results of semifinals, consolation third round and consolation semifinals>>](#)