

## Baker leads Metro parade to state

Written by Jim Ecker

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Brenden Baker might cut his shoulder-length blond hair after the state wrestling tournament next week, but he's got bigger concerns right now than trimming his flowing locks.

Baker is wrestling with a broken finger and a sore back, so getting a haircut can wait. And he's certainly not going to cut it before the state tournament, because that might be bad luck.

"No, we're going to leave it alone," the Cedar Rapids Jefferson senior said Saturday after winning the 120-pound title at the Class 3A district meet at Jefferson. "I've lasted this long. It's been almost a year."

Baker had fairly short hair last year, but his last haircut was about 362 days ago.

"It was actually the day before we left for state last year. So on Wednesday it will be a full year," he said.

He kind of likes his hairstyle - "It's different" - so he's not sure if he'll visit a barbershop or stylist in the near future.

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"Maybe," he said. "The state title comes first. We'll see what happens after that."

Baker captured the 120-pound title with a wild 18-14 victory over Bradan Birt of Western Dubuque in the finals. When it was over, Baker put his right index finger to his mouth and tried to hush Western Dubuque fans who had been rooting against him.

"I wasn't going to make much of a reaction," he said, "but then I looked up and I saw about 30 grown men flipping me off.

"I shouldn't have done it," he said about putting his finger to his lips.

"It didn't look good on my part. I made my school look not so good, but it was one of those emotional things and I couldn't really control it. I want to apologize to everyone."

Baker broke the pinkie finger on his right hand in a dual meet against Dubuque Hempstead Jan. 7 and he's battled a muscular problem in his back since early in the season, but he's stayed in the lineup and fought the pain. He tweaked the back again in the finals Saturday, but kept wrestling after a short break.

He missed several meets at the start of the 2014-15 season with four broken toes and he's also dealt with a broken thumb and shoulder problems during his prep career. "It's been a battle," he said. "I've been pretty injury-prone."

Eight Metro grapplers won district titles at Jefferson and qualified for the state tournament at Wells Fargo Arena next week in Des Moines. Six other Metro wrestlers punched their ticket as a district runner-up.

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