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WRESTLING: CHAMPS — Park Hill brings home Class 4 title



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Sports - Park Hill Trojans

WRITTEN BY BILL KNUST

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COLUMBIA — It is a Class 4 race that will have coaches, wrestlers and fans talking for the next few years.

What figured to be a knock-down, drag-out fight for the Class 4 state wrestling team title lived up to the hype and then some. In the end though, everybody's favorite to win it all emerged victorious — Park Hill High.

Park Hill won its first state title since 2006, when it won the Class 3 title for the second consecutive year, and its first big-class title since 2003.

The Trojans capped off a perfect tournament season with the Class 4 team title. They won the equally challenging — if not tougher — Toshiba Business Solutions KCI Classic in December, the Jefferson City and

Winnetonka tournaments in January, and capped it off with district and state team championships in February.

After the quarterfinal round Friday, Feb. 20, the top four teams were within seven points of each other.

"Every year you hate the state wrestling tournament, and you love the state wrestling tournament," Trojans coach Bill Erneste said. "I think we're all destined for evil or something, I don't know what it is. For instance we win the state team title so we ought to be excited, but then you have other guys who didn't get their state championships, so you are down and thinking about those things. You ride that roller coaster all weekend.

"I think the one thing that defines Park Hill's success is that everyone believes in each other. Every



Matt Frye/Sun News — Park Hill High coach Bill Erneste (right) and 103-pounder Skyler Wood share a smile after Wood won the 103-pound division at the Class 4 State Championships on Saturday, Feb. 22. Wood's win clinched the Class 4 team title for the Trojans. It was their first big-class team title since 2003.

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wrestler scored a point this weekend, and when that happens all of a sudden it does become a team sport.”

With the close race developing, that made the semifinal and consolation quarterfinal round Friday night a big one. The Trojans responded with the guts they have shown all year. Every Trojan winner, except one wrestler, won by a major decision or better to rack up precious bonus points.

“We knew that going in,” Erneste said. “When other teams came in with 10 or 11 guys and all of a sudden we were down to six, I knew we needed all we could get. Bonus points were huge.”

That round proved to be the separation point for the Trojans from the rest of the pack. By no means was anything set in concrete heading into the final day of the tournament. Fort Zumwalt West and Blue Springs still had outside shots of catching Park Hill, but when Kaleb Friedley began the morning session by pinning Fort Zumwalt West’s Nick Weible, it began to set the inevitable in motion.

Friedley had suffered a tough loss to Holt’s Tony James, 6-4, in the quarterfinals on Friday, but he bounced back to take third place.

“I didn’t accomplish my goals, but as a team we accomplished our goals,” Friedley said. “I was never able to put that loss behind me, but that is what drove me the rest of the tournament.”

Erneste said he was especially proud of the way Friedley fought back.

“How many people lose in the quarterfinals or semis and don’t come back because they are distraught?” Erneste said. “About 10 minutes after his match was over I got a text from him saying, ‘I let myself down coach, but I promise I won’t let the team down.’

“When you get text messages like that from studs like Kaleb Friedley, I have the best job in Platte County getting to be the head wrestling coach at Park Hill. Our kids are definitely a family, and their parents’ dedication that they give towards their kids — I am blessed to have the job that I have.”

With the Trojans’ lead increasing before the finals, 103-pounder Skyler Wood had the chance to seal the deal and make the final round a lot less stressful on Erneste. Like he had done all tournament, Wood controlled his opponent, Fort Zumwalt West’s Kyle Hussey, and walked away with a 6-2 win and his first state title.

“He had been at a couple of tournaments I have been at before, and he had always placed lower than me so I wasn’t too worried,” Wood said. “He had a really good tournament though. You can’t beat this though; it is a great feeling.”

Erneste bestowed perhaps one of the highest compliments possible on a kid when he was talking about Wood.

“I think there is a second coming of Alan Waters and it is in the form of Skyler Wood,” Erneste said. “He went out there and wrestled hard for six minutes. Some guys like to coast after they get a lead, Skyler likes to accelerate. He doesn’t just beat you, he makes sure you never want to wrestle him again and that it isn’t even close.”

Along with Wood’s title, Waters also won his third consecutive state title. Three other Trojans finished in second place. Bricker Dixon (112 pounds), Johnny Eblen (171 pounds) and Hayden Bock (189 pounds) all finished as runners-up, but each one will have a chance to come back next year and win a state championship.

Speaking of championships, the Trojans should be the favorites again next year since they return all but one wrestler who qualified for state.

“I’ve got to be honest with you,” Erneste said. “I will drive home tomorrow and the state trophy will probably sit in the passenger seat next to me and we are going to be thinking how we can improve for next year. If you are sitting back counting state championships you are neglecting some kid out there that finished second or third. We need to get our kids going.”

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