

THROUGH MY LENS

Wait, track starts today?

By NATE BEIER
Sports Editor



I recall riding the practice bus home after wrestling practice late in the year as an experience with mixed emotions.

On the one hand, I looked forward to being done with the season. Yet, on the other, I knew that there was a very quick downhill slide to summer. The telltale sign was the extended hours of sunlight we get in February and beyond.

Well, for the past month, I've had flashbacks of those feelings as I've watched the sun stay out longer and our days get warmer.

Today is the first day of the track and field season.

Let's celebrate. That means baseball, softball, soccer and the like aren't far behind. How ready are we for this?

Here's my reminder to get your brats, dogs and grill ready. Water dogs aren't acceptable. Oh boy, who's ready for being outside this spring?

STILL PLENTY TO LOVE ABOUT BASKETBALL

Okay, we do still have two weeks of basketball left and there are enough local teams left to get you to leave your house for a game.

I really thought we'd be lacking in interesting stories this postseason. I expected a couple of state qualifiers on the boys side, and a few contenders on the girls'.

I didn't think we'd get three girls basketball teams to state, but somehow we did.

Our area will be represented by Aquinas, Blair-Taylor and West Salem this coming weekend in Green Bay.

Can Aquinas live up to its top ranking? How will West Salem manage to stand tall in after coming from a historically weak sectional? What will Blair-Taylor do in its state debut?

Yeah, there's plenty to watch there.

On the boys side, I'm curious to see how the Division 5 bracket plays out. Royall and Hillsboro get a third meeting and I really think Potosi is playing good ball in the south, but a resilient Wauzeka-Stauben team can still throw a wrench in the works.

As for the big dogs, La Crosse Central gets a rematch with Medford this week. Can they pass the Raiders again and possibly sneak out another state berth?

Has West Salem prepared enough for not just a trip back to state, but a trip to a state title? There's pressure on the Panthers, but the team has expected to be a target for every opponent.

Lastly, Luther may just yet manage to send coach Brad Schaper out on a high note. The Knights just need to keep navigating the state's toughest Division 4 if they want to get back to state, and this time, they'd play in Madison.

See? There's plenty to watch. Get out to a game this week!

GIRLS BASKETBALL D2 SECTIONAL SEMIFINAL MEMOMONIE 56 TOMAH 31

Tomah's Cinderella run in WIAA postseason ends with sectional semifinal loss to Menomonie

By ZACH RASTALL
Sports Writer

A memorable postseason run brought Tomah into sectionals for the first time in a quarter-century and among the final group of 16 still dancing into March in the Division 2 field. But after bumping into the No. 1 seed in their region, that dream run was brought to its end.

Top-seeded Menomonie (19-9) used an excellent start to power its way to a 56-31 victory over No. 7 seed

Tomah (13-15) in a WIAA Division 2 sectional semifinal held Thursday, March 2 at Memorial High School in Eau Claire.

It was tough sledding for the Timberwolves from the very start. The Mustangs roared their way to a 19-1 advantage midway through the first half, with Tomah's first field goal of the evening coming just over 13 minutes in the game and ending a Menomonie run of 17 unanswered points.

By then, the hole was too big for the Timberwolves to

dig out of the rest of the way.

"Our focus was beating their press and we did a good job of that. But the next portion of that is getting into your offense and we really struggled getting into an offense, getting a good shot," said Tomah head coach Mark Von Haden. "They played pressure man to man, and we just couldn't handle it. Giving them easy steals, throwing passes in their hands, then giving up easy baskets on the back end of it."

The Mustangs sat ahead 26-9 at halftime and led by

as much as 33 at one point in the second half. Tomah did put together a late 15-7 run to cut some of that deficit down, but ultimately that only served to lessen the final margin of defeat.

Menomonie was led in the win by sophomore wing Brooklyn Birt with 12 points, junior guard Sophia Schoenberger with 11 points and junior guards Mary Berg and Sammy Jacobsen with nine points apiece.

As for the Timberwolves, senior guard/wing Lauren

Noth tallied a game-high 14 points and found a groove in the second half, but none of her teammates scored more than four points.

The Mustangs advanced to Saturday's sectional finals, where they lost a 60-59 heartbreaker to No. 2 seed Lakeland (22-6) in Medford to miss out on a second straight trip to the state tournament. It was a rematch

(TOMAH) cont. from pg 9

GYMNASTICS INDIVIDUAL STATE

MAD 4 MEDALS

SPARTA'S HEMKER LEADS AREA GYMNASTS WITH QUARTET OF PODIUM FINISHES

By NATE BEIER
Sports Writer

The task was tall and the expectation equally high. Sparta's Ella Hemker nearly lived up to both in her final gymnastics meet of her high school career.

The reigning Division 2 vault champion came as close to as one could ask to reclaiming her spot on the podium, but was forced to settle for second by hundredths of a point.

Failing to repeat as a state champion shouldn't be the takeaway from this year's state meet, however, as Hemker did something few area gymnasts could - that is, collect a handful of medals in her final outing while representing Sparta.

Hemker medaled in each of the four events she qualified for, bringing her career state medal total to an even dozen.

Coach Lucy Bennett said, "I think her accomplishments will be hard to beat, but also a reminder of what hard work and commitment can achieve."

This year's state experience started with the floor exercise. Hemker had the challenge of leading off Saturday's state meet, but managed to score a 9.367. Next came the highly anticipated vault, which resulted in a score of 9.467.

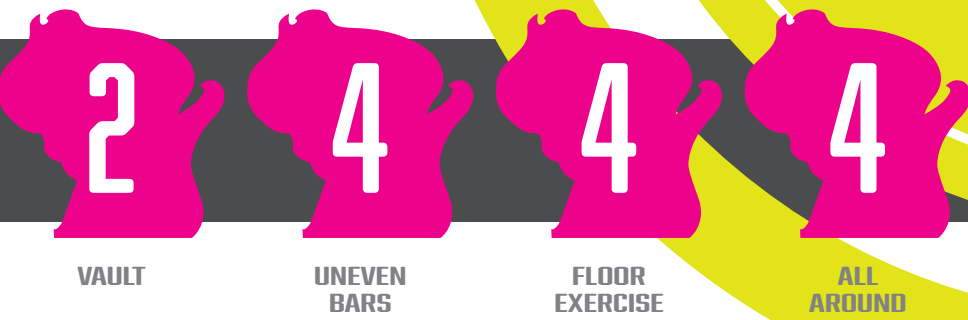
On bars, Hemker pulled off a surprising 8.933 - a score that landed a fourth place finish.

"Ella's bar routine was a great surprise and placing on that event had to feel good for her," said Bennet. "She has really been working hard at connecting elements and building the skill level in

(HEMKER) cont. pg 11



Sparta's Ella Hemker wrapped up her gymnastics career with four state medals at Saturday's state meet, including a runner-up finish in the vault. Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.



GYMNASTICS TEAM STATE

West Salem co-op surprise with silver finish



The West Salem co-op captured second place at last week's WIAA state meet. The West Salem/Aquinas/Bangor squad scored a 138 to edge third place Elkhorn (137.9167). Pictured are (left to right) Hayden Rhode, Taliya Michlig, Hailey Ives. Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

By NATE BEIER
Sports Editor

There was a surprise waiting at the end of the WIAA state gymnastics meet, and it's one that caught nearly everyone that were following the West Salem co-op off guard.

After grinding out a meet that lasted nearly eight hours, the West Salem/Aquinas/Bangor team were rewarded with a trip to the podium for their efforts.

West Salem finished second among the Division 2 field at

Friday's team state portion of the WIAA state gymnastics meet in Wisconsin Rapids after tallying a score of 138.

That score was barely enough to bring home the silver as Elkhorn was third with a 137.9167.

West Salem coach Carrie O'Hearn said that the feat was such a surprise, several parents had left the meet prior to the awards ceremony thinking there wasn't a chance their team could capture any of the

(WEST SALEM) cont. pg 10

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Sparta's Ella Hemker cartwheels onto the springboard during her time on the vault in Saturday's WIAA state meet. Hemker finished her career with four state medals on vault, including a state title and two runners-up. **Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

(HEMKER)
 cont. from pg 7
 her routine.”
 The senior ended with beam - the only event she didn't qualify for in - and scored a 8.733 for her all-around tally.
 The combined score - a 36.5 - was enough to place fourth among the best all-arounds in the state.

Vault to the Top
 With Hemker's silver finish on the vault, it's important to note the success that the Sparta program has had in the event for the past five years.
 Since 2019, Sparta has had one of the state's best vaulting performances at the state meet individually and, for three of those years, one of the best vaulting tandems.
 Lily Wiegand placed fourth on vault as a freshman on and then took second as a sophomore.
 Teammate Hemker was right there the next year to take over as the runner-up, though Wiegand only fell to a third

Sparta's Ella Hemker performs her final floor routine at Saturday's WIAA state meet. Hemker took fourth with a score of 9.367 and finished with four total medals at the state meet.
Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.



place tie.
 Last year Hemker won the event, but Wiegand still managed to tie for sixth to round out her career.
 This year's outing featured a newcomer to the state game as Gabby Bjorkman qualified in the event.
 Bjorkman scored well at state, finishing with a 9.167,

but with stiff competition ahead of her, the freshman had to settle for a 12th place tie.
 “Gabby had a very good vault,” said Bennett. “The competition at vault was really tough, but she focused on her vault. I think she will accomplish great things in the next four years.”

**BOYS BASKETBALL
 D2 REGIONAL SEMIFINAL:
 LA CROSSE CENTRAL 65
 TOMAH 42**

Tomah bows out of regional play

By **ZACH RASTALL**
 Sports Writer

Tomah's third crack at La Crosse Central didn't change the end result, so the Timberwolves are done for the season.
 The third-seeded RiverHawks (21-5) downed No. 6 seed Tomah (10-16) for a 65-42 victory in their WIAA Division 2 boys' basketball regional semifinal meeting Friday, March 3 in La Crosse. In the two regular-season matchups between the Mississippi Valley Conference counterparts, La Crosse Central won 70-32 on December 13 in Tomah and 53-39 on January 27 in La Crosse.

The RiverHawks opened the night on a 13-2 run and never trailed on their way to a 36-14 halftime advantage and a commanding victory.
 Central junior guard/wing Henry Meyer scored a game-high 22 points and senior shooting guard/small forward Bennett Fried tacked on 14 points. Tomah senior small forward Tom Hesse and senior point guard Brady Plueger tallied 15 and 13 points, respectively, in the season-ending defeat.
 After that win, the RiverHawks went on to defeat No. 2 seed Onalaska (19-6) 41-39 in the regional finals Saturday. That game served as a rubber match between the two MVC co-champions after they split their meetings in the regular season.

**BOYS BASKETBALL
 WIAA SECTIONAL**

Central, West Salem lead charge into sectionals

By **NATE BEIER**
 Sports Writer

DIVISION 2
 La Crosse Central is the last Mississippi Valley Conference team standing after beating Onalaska last week. The Riverhawks will face Medford Thursday at Menomonie.

DIVISION 3
 Perhaps the hottest team in the postseason as been G-E-T. The Red Hawks broke their bracket by topping Eastern Cloverbelt champion, Colby, before surprising Dunn-St. Croix champ, Elk Mound, for the program's first regional title since 2019.
 Now the Red Hawks will face West Salem Wednesday night in a sectional semifinal game at Arcadia.

DIVISION 4
 Onalaska Luther will try to return to the state tournament for the first time since qualifying in 2021. The Knights will play Mineral Point Thursday at Lancaster.
 Dairyland Large champ, Whitehall, will face Fall Creek at Osseo-Fairchild.

DIVISION 5
 Scenic Bluffs Conference foes, Royall and Hillsboro will face off for a third time this week in a D5 sectional semifinal at Richland Center.

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