

THROUGH MY LENS

Girls wrestling, a welcome addition

By ZACH RASTALL
Sports Writer



Out of the entire Wisconsin high school sports calendar, I don't know that there's any single event I look forward to on an annual basis more than the individual state wrestling tournament.

At the end of every February, it's always a privilege to head down to Madison for one of the state's best high school sports showcases. And it's not just because it's the weekend where you're most likely to find Busch Light at downtown Madison bars.

Any state tournament, regardless of the sport, is going to carry a special weight to it. But there's something unique about state wrestling that makes it stand out.

The individual nature of the sport means you get such a wide range of representation of schools from every corner of Wisconsin. It's a dynamic that's only matched by the state cross country and track meets.

On top of that, you get the unique experience of all these matches going on at once before an engaged, intense Kohl Center crowd. And the atmosphere and crowd roars that come during the championship matches on Saturday evening? It's electrifying.

These are all just observations from someone watching. I can only imagine what a thrill it is for the wrestlers who are active participants at the center of it all.

With that in mind, it was a delight to see that this year, for the first time, the girls got to take part in this wholly unique experience.

Back in June 2020, the WIAA Board of Control gave the stamp of approval on creating a girls' state wrestling tournament to go in effect starting with the 2021-22 season.

The 80th edition of the traditional individual state tournament will be remembered as the one featuring both the boys and the girls for the first time. And, at least from my perspective, it was a rousing success.

The girl qualifiers did so through sectionals and their arrival at the Kohl Center brought with them two additional mats during the state tournament to compensate and keep everything on track. From what I could tell, this allowed sessions to move along smoothly and there was plenty of space for the two extra mats.

A governing body like the WIAA will always be a lightning rod for criticism, and often deservedly so. But in this case? Props to them for successfully integrating the girls' tournament into the existing one and giving them deserved equal footing on such a grand stage.

STATE GYMNASTICS ELLA HEMKER, SPARTA



Sparta's Ella Hemker is ready to defend her state vault title this weekend, but her real emphasis is on enjoying her fourth and last year at the WIAA state gymnastics meet. **Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

RETURN OF THE QUEEN

SPARTA'S HEMKER READY FOR FOURTH AND FINAL STATE TRIP

By NATE BEIER
Sports Writer

Get this - repeating as a state champion on vault is not a top priority for Sparta's Ella Hemker.

As much outside expectation as there may be, the SHS senior seems more focused on having the best all around performance in her last go as the WIAA state meet than targeting another state title. Staying loose and enjoying the moment are ways for her to avoid the pressure of repeating as a state champion and actually enjoy the thrill of the state spectacle.

"I want to have fun because it's my last time there," said Hemker, "and competing with some of the girls I've competed with in club for the last time, it'll be really fun."

The fun begins this Saturday, March 4, as Hemker makes her fourth-straight state meet appearance. Regardless of what happens this weekend, however, Hemker will leave the SHS program as the most decorated gymnast the program has ever seen. Last year's state championship in the vault was the icing on the cake, but beyond that, she already has seven other state medals.

Adding to that collection would only strengthen her legacy within the Sparta program and in the Coulee Region

as a whole, but it's not something she's focusing on this time around.

Having consistent and confident routines on all the events is the goal she's set forth and the chips will fall as the may after that.

"I'd love to place, but I really just want to have fun and have confident routines."

Sparta head coach Lucy Bennett said she knows Hemker puts a lot of pressure on herself and it's up to the coaching staff to help keep her positive throughout the meet in order for her to achieve her highest success. Giving her senior star some support in this fashion is the least the coaching staff can do considering all the help Hemker has been in helping to put Sparta on the map in the past, present and future.

(HEMKER) cont. pg 11

FULL STATE AHEAD

WHEN: Friday, March 3rd, team competition begins at 12 p.m.
Saturday, March 4th, Individual competition begins at 10 a.m.

WHERE: Wisconsin Rapids Lincoln High School

INFO: You can find the order of rounds and list of qualifiers at wiaawi.org

STATE GYMNASTICS WEST SALEM

West Salem co-op leads area teams to state meet

By NATE BEIER
Sports Writer

The West Salem co-op is no stranger to the WIAA state gymnastics meet.

The Panthers gymnastics program qualified for the state meet for the 18th time in program history last week after winning its own sectional. Unfortunately, the co-op was the only local team to advance to the last meet of the year. Viroqua's co-op was a couple points away from qualifying from the Platteville sectional.

West Salem posted a program-record score of 141.6 in the Coulee Conference meet two weeks ago and will need to come close to that if they hope to compete for one of the top two spots in Friday's team competition at Wisconsin Rapids High School.

At sectionals last week,

West Salem posted a 139.75 and just edged out River Falls (139) for the sectional title.

West Salem's highest finish in the past decade was a third place finale back in 2019. The Panthers were sixth last year.

Leading the Panthers is senior gymnast Taliya Michlig. Michlig claimed the all-around title last week with a 36.425. Sparta's Ella Hemker was the runner-up.

Individually, Michlig will be joined by Kennedy Garbers and Camdyn Lyga on floor in Saturday's portion of the state meet.

Natalie Peterson also made it through on bars.

Competition for the team portion begins at 12 p.m. on Friday and at 10 a.m. on Saturday for the individual portion. Information on the order of events can be found on wiaawi.org.

3-3-23 GIRLS BASKETBALL SECTIONAL SEMIFINALS



Tomah's Brin Neumann

DIVISION 2

Tomah (13-14, 4-8)
5th place tie
Mississippi Valley
vs
Menomonie (18-8, 8-6)
3rd place
Big Rivers

@ Eau Claire Memorial



West Salem's Anna McConkey

DIVISION 3

West Salem (24-2, 12-0)
1st place
Coulee
vs
Elk Mound (25-1, 14-0)
1st place
Dunn-St. Croix

@ Arcadia



Bangor's Joeryn Freit

DIVISION 4

Bangor (20-6, 13-1)
1st place
Scenic Bluffs
vs
Aquinas (25-1, 12-0)
1st place
Mississippi Valley

@ Onalaska

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STATE GYMNASTICS MORGAN SIEKERT, ISABELL KORN, VIROQUA

BACK FOR MORE

CASHTON DUO KEEPS VIROQUA TRADITION ALIVE IN RETURN TO STATE



Cashton's Morgan Siekert (left) and Isabell Korn (right) will look to make another podium trip at the WIAA state gymnastics meet this weekend in Wisconsin Rapids. Both medaled at last year's meet. **Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

By NATE BEIER
Sports Editor

For Morgan Siekert and Isabell Korn, the idea of making a return trip to the WIAA state gymnastics meet was always in question. The duo understands their scores depend completely on how each judge perceives a routine, but a return to state went beyond that as the Viroqua gymnastics co-op was close to folding prior to the 2022-23 season.

The co-op had issues finding a coach after losing Darcy McClelland, who had been in charge the 10 years prior, to retirement at the end of last season. It wasn't until the week before practice kicked off that Melissa Peterson and Lily Wiegand stepped up in order to ensure their gymnasts would have a place and reason to compete this winter.

The roller coaster didn't stop there, however. On top of the daily grind of practice and preparation, injuries and illness, the Viroqua gymnastics team continued to go through changes. A small roster that started with seven was whittled down to five - the bare minimum to compete as a team - and Peterson eventually stepped away as a co-head coach to tend to family issues.

Still, the Viroqua area gymnasts pushed ahead. Last weekend the team - the team of just five - nearly pulled off an improbable run to state after finishing third at the Platteville sectional on Friday, February 24. The top two teams, Reedsburg and Platteville, finished with scores of 136.375 and 134.35, respectively, while Viroqua was just shy of a second place finish with a 132.1.

Even so, the Viroqua co-op still finished with plenty to hang its hat on as both Korn and Siekert managed to advance in multiple events and will compete this weekend at the WIAA state gymnastics meet in Wisconsin Rapids on Saturday, March 4.

"I'd say it's been crazy," said Isabell Korn. "It's been a lot of changes. A week before (the season), we didn't even know if we were going to have a program, we didn't even have a coach - nothing. So we just kind of got thrown into it; it was just such a big surprise, like, we are having a season now and getting enough girls together to compete as a varsity team. So, it's just been crazy so far, but we got through it."

Korn won the all-around at last week's sectional with a score of 36.15 and also claimed the beam title with 9.425. On the bars, the Cashton sophomore was second with a 9.05, fourth on vault (8.875) and finished ninth on floor with an 8.8.

This Saturday, Korn will compete in the all-around, beam, bars and vault at the state meet.

Siekert finished with a pair of second place scores after scoring a 9 on beam and a 9.075 on the floor at last weekend's sectional. The Cashton junior also took fifth on both the vault (8.75) and bars (8.55) and combined scores for a fourth place finish in the all-around (35.375).

This weekend Siekert will compete in all five events this weekend at the state meet.

BUDDY SYSTEM

For Siekert, it will be her third trip competing at state. However, it'll be the third format change for the junior in as many years as the state meet will go back to splitting up teams and individuals for its competition. Friday's portion of the state meet will be for the teams that qualify. The West Salem co-op, which won its own sectional last weekend, will be part of that. Saturday is set aside for the individual competition, which will include the both Siekert and Korn.

Other area gymnasts include Sparta's Ella Hemker and Gabby Bjorkman, G-E-T's Abby Miller, Onalaska's Emma Rudie, Reedsburg's Natalie Brunner and Emily Craker, Prairie du Chien's Madilyn Fisher and Alyssa Schoepp and West Salem's Taliya Michlig.

Despite all the changes, Siekert and her younger counterpart say that having a teammate along for the ride is one way to help stay calm upon entering the state meet.

Korn said, "Well, she (Siekert) knows how worked up I get, so she knows how to comfort me. I don't really need to comfort Morgan, I just reassure her that she is good."

"It's more of a confidence boost," interjected Siekert. "I feel excited because I get to have Isabell there and we get to be with all of the people we've competed against for three years now."

Siekert and Korn will be competing with the other state qualifiers from the Platteville sectional Saturday afternoon - competitors they have competed against not just last weekend, but often earlier in the season by going to meets at places like River Valley, Dodgeville and Platteville.

IT FELT AMAZING, HONESTLY. SEEING MY SCORE HELD UP THE WHOLE DAY WAS CRAZY. - ISABELL KORN, VIROQUA CO-OP ON MEDALLING AS A FRESHMAN

FINISHING TOUCHES

The week leading up to the state meet is all about tightening up routines and cleaning up footwork or skills to reduce the number of deductions incurred during a performance.

The expectations for both are to have a good state meet and possibly improve on last year's showing. Korn took fourth on bars a year ago while Siekert was fifth on vault. This year the more veteran gymnast, Siekert, says she's entering with tempered expectations when it comes to final scores.

"I'm not expecting to place, but obviously it'd be exciting, to again," said Siekert, "but you never know how anything's going to go."

Despite qualifying in all four events individually as well as the all-around, Siekert says she's mostly focused on that all-around score.

"I think I'm an all-around gymnast. I don't really excel at one event. If there was one, it'd be floor, but with how the judges see things, it's difficult to understand what score you'll get that time. I just hope that all my scores will contribute to be a good score in the end."

Korn says she's working on her vault ahead of the state meet. She states it was a challenge to score well on the apparatus last year, but has shown improvement and has increased her confidence in her skills there. Confidence is also a big factor on beam and bars as she heads into the final meet of the year - case in point, her podium finish last year.

Korn says that realizing she was good enough to place on bars was one of the biggest surprises in her state debut in 2022. The fact that she jumped on the scene and made her way into the top four in the state really caught her by surprise.

"It felt amazing, honestly," said Korn. "We were one of the first teams to go on bars. Seeing my score held up the whole day was crazy."

The pair will start on vault in the first round of competition - which starts at 10 a.m. - at the WIAA state gymnastics meet on Saturday, March 4 at Wisconsin Rapids Lincoln High School. Korn will be the first to go while Siekert second. The pair will then head to bars in the second round before moving to beam in the third and floor in the fourth.

(HEMKER)
cont. from pg 9

TEAM FIRST ATTITUDE LEADS TO INDIVIDUAL GROWTH

Bennett has known she's had a special athlete in Hemker for the past four years. For the first three of those seasons, Hemker was instrumental in putting Sparta gymnastics on the map with a trio of team state appearances. Though Sparta came up short of a fourth-straight team state berth this year, Bennett says Hemker was committed to helping drive the program forward.

According to Bennett, Hemker was a big proponent of helping the freshmen come along in their development this year. She said the senior was eager to help demonstrate skills and build routines for the girls.

Those areas of assistance helped Sparta grow as the season progressed. Team scores swelled as the season progressed. Despite finishing fifth at last weekend's sectional, the team scored a 130.8, which was nearly 10 points higher than the first meet of the year.

"Raising the skill level and execution were some of the things we've worked on all year," said Bennett.

She said the turning point in the season was when the freshmen took the feedback from the coaches and actually worked to improve in their weak areas. Even though injuries and illness did slow some of the progress, Bennett said she was very happy with the team growth by season's end - and end that included an additional surprise to Hemker's fourth-straight trip to state as freshman Gabby Bjorkman also made it through after taking fourth on the vault.

KEYS TO THE VAULT

The vault may be the place for Sparta to make a name for itself this year. With Hemker and Bjorkman both competing for a place on the podium, it will be hard for fans not to recognize Sparta at this weekend's state meet.

All eyes, however, will be on Hemker, and rightfully so. The reigning D2 state champ will be considered the frontrunner

in the event until proven otherwise.

It's a good thing the Sparta senior is confident in her ability to defend her title from a year ago.

"I feel strongest about vault because my vaults have been pretty consistent this year," said Hemker.

You'd be hard pressed to find a meet where Hemker didn't win the vault this year. However, she knows the level of her competitors heading into this weekend's state meet will be high. Three of the other four sectional champion vaulters scored better than Hemker last weekend. Rice Lake's Avery Ash, Elkhorn's Kaylee Frank and Prairie du Chien's Madilyn Fisher all managed to score better than the Sparta senior. However, that isn't a necessarily a great indication of what's to come this weekend as the entire lot will be scored by the same judges in Saturday's state final.

Hemker's vault is a yurchenko layout, which translates to her cartwheeling onto the springboard, flipping backwards to meet the vault, then flipping backwards, heels over head without tucking into a ball before landing. The skill is worth a 10.0 if done right. Hemker won the event at last weekend's sectional, but still only scored a 9.35, meaning there's still room for improvement heading into this weekend's season final.

Hemker said the deductions came from the post flight, not being in a full layout position and a step on the landing.

This week's preparation includes some extra focus on her vault. However, that means putting in some extra hours. The practice space that Sparta uses in the building across from the Barney Center on the northeast side of town doesn't have a long enough runway for her to safely practice such a vault. The park and rec building space isn't equipped for her needs on a floor routine, so instead, she works out at AMKM Gymnastics across town in Sparta once her high school practice concludes.

AROUND THE GYM

Hemker says she's also putting special attention towards bars this week as the event is one of the harder to score well in. She says that adding bonus skills are key to pushing her scores up, so adding those

and polishing her routine is important. Last weekend Hemker won the bars event with an 8.9 after beating Coulee Conference bars champ, Taliya Michlig (8.8).

The senior's floor routine lagged last weekend, despite scoring a 9.3. Hemker was tied for fifth in the event with West Salem's Camdyn Lyga (Bangor). The last two years, however, Hemker finished third and fourth place at state in the event, so it's conceivable she could make her way back to the podium this weekend. On beam, Hemker tied for sixth last weekend and scored a meet-low 8.75. That score helped West Salem's Michlig win the sectional title in the all-around after edging Hemker 36.425 to 36.3.

Still, though, Hemker's combined scores are among the best in the state. The last two years are evidence after taking fifth last year and third in 2021 in the all-around.

LASTING LEGACY

There's more to Hemker than medals and trophies, however. The outgoing gymnast wants to improve the visibility and quality of gymnastics and is willing to help push it forward as a competitor or coach. As mentioned previously, Hemker's quick to help her current teammates by helping demonstrating and teaching. She also helps even younger athletes as an instructor at AMKM Gymnastics. Those roles, coupled with her success as a competitor has put her in a unique spot to be an ambassador for the sport.

"It's a cool leadership role," said Hemker. "Knowing that some girls who maybe aren't in high school, maybe younger, than that will look up to and see that these things are possible. (Gymnastics) is a fun sport and it can be more well known if they want to put in the time and work to get here."

Hemker will join the other qualifiers from the West Salem sectional on floor in the first round of competition at 10 a.m. at Wisconsin Rapids Lincoln High School on Saturday, March 4. The group will then move to vault in the third round and will follow with bars and beam. More information can be found at wiaawi.org.

STATE GYMNASTICS GABBY BJORKMAN, SPARTA

BJORKMAN READY TO VAULT INTO SPARTA HISTORY AT STATE

By NATE BEIER
Sports Editor

Freshman Gabby Bjorkman became the newest member of the Sparta state qualifiers club after taking fourth in vault at last week's sectional.

The freshman didn't lack for confidence going into the West Salem sectional as she entered the penultimate meet of the year with a mindset of qualifying for state.

"I was definitely expecting to get in on something" said Bjorkman. "I've worked super hard and was expecting to get through on something."

She did. Bjorkman scored an 8.875 on vault for fourth place. The freshman was close on bars and the all-around after taking seventh in both, just two places away from state qualification.

For her first time at state, however, Bjorkman has just one thing to worry about - two tries at the vault.

Bjorkman does a tsuk pike for her vault, which is worth a 9.8 to start with. She says her hand placement and footwork on the landing are the areas of improvement heading into Saturday's state meet.

Preparing for the state atmosphere is another variable that can be intimidating for first-time state goers. Again, Bjorkman seems ready to take on the meet with a high level of confidence.

"Crowds don't really affect me. I'm only there to focus on my vault."

The Sparta freshman seems all business, but does genuinely look forward to what's ahead this weekend. Having a chance to take in the state experience is something she does look forward to as it allows her to see a wider range of athletes from across the state.

"I'm looking forward to watching everyone else. I'm obviously excited for my vault because I feel super confident on that, but it'll be nice to see other people compete because I haven't really seen any of them before."

