

## Wempen tops No.1 guy at state wrestling

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES -- Linn-Mar sophomore Matt Wempen is a defending state wrestling champion, but he faced a daunting task in the quarterfinals of the state meet Friday morning when he met the top-ranked man in his class.

No worries.

Wempen handed Bryce Meyer of Fort Madison his first loss of the season, 3-0, to reach the 113-pound semifinals Friday night and move within two wins of claiming his second title in two years.

Wempen knew Meyer was ranked No.1 in the state, but it didn't seem to faze him.

"I try not to pay attention to that," he said after raising his record to 35-1. "All I can say is that I'm confident in myself. Rankings don't mean anything. Anyone can take it."

Wempen, who is ranked No.4, will face another big challenge in the semifinals Friday night when he bangs heads with Kaz Onoo of Mason City. Onoo is ranked No.3 and handed Wempen his only loss of the season at the Five Seasons Duals in Cedar Rapids in early December.

Wempen is proud of the state title he won last year as a freshman, but he's not walking around Wells Fargo Arena with a crown on his head. "I try not to think about it, because it's a new

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year," he said.

Experience counts for something, however.

"This year coming back to the state tournament, I'm more prepared," he said. "I'm more used to it, because I've done it once in this environment.

"I try not to think about last year, other than what I'm used to doing. I think it has helped me."

Wempen is happy with what's happened so far at the state meet. He's won his first two matches, and if he wins two more he'll be a state champion again.

"I'm winning matches, so that's where I want to be," he said. "You just have to take it one match at a time and worry about the next guy standing in front of you before you worry about state titles and stuff. You just worry about the next match you're going to have."



Linn-Mar had seven wrestlers in the quarterfinals Friday morning, but four of them lost and the Lions fell to a distant fifth place in the team standings.

The most shocking setback for Linn-Mar came at 145 pounds, where Joel Northrup was ranked No.1 in his class and sporting a perfect 48-0 record heading into the quarterfinals. He lost a

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marathon match to sixth-ranked Matt Victor of Indianola, 2-1, in four overtime periods.

Alijah Jeffery (120) and Ross Lembeck (152), Linn-Mar's two other top-ranked grapplers, won their matches Friday morning and advanced to the semifinals Friday night. Damon Griffin (126), Andrew Holladay (182) and Justin Green (220) lost and fell into the consolation round.

The Prairie Hawks fashioned a 4-1 record in the quarterfinals with a succession of impressive victories by Trey Blaha (138), Skyler St. John (145), Cameron Rathje (170) and Andrew Netolicky (285). Blaha posted an 8-0 major decision to get it started, then St. John, Rathje and Netolicky followed with pins.



Josh Wenger lost in the quarterfinals for Prairie at 126 pounds.

Prairie held onto second place in the team standings Friday morning with 63 points, but it's highly unlikely the Hawks or anyone else will be able to catch Southeast Polk. The top-ranked Rams have rolled up 91.5 points and appear headed to the state crown.

Bettendorf is in third place with 60.5 points, followed by Waverly-Shell Rock (49) and Linn-Mar (46).

Blaha is ranked No.4 at 138 pounds and was much too tough for fifth-ranked Dylan Buchheit of Southeast Polk in the quarterfinals.

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"I tried to stay on my offense," said Blaha, who raised his record to 37-7. "I can beat anybody when I just do my stuff."

Blaha said his confidence level has remained high at the state tournament. "The same as it's always been," he remarked.

Cedar Rapids Jefferson junior Michael Moncivais continued his impressive work in the postseason tournaments. He pinned Juan Figueroa of Storm Lake in 4:29 in the quarterfinals, raising his record to 33-11.