

Witte wins a thriller for 145-pound title

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES -- Zach Witte could write a thriller about his high school wrestling career someday.

Chapter 1: Witte finishes a surprising second at the 2009 state tournament as a starry-eyed freshman.

Chapter 2: Witte fails to qualify for state as a sophomore in 2010 and dedicates himself to winning the 2011 state title, vowing to climb to the top of the podium.

Chapter 3: He does it.

Witte became Cedar Rapids Prairie's first state champion in five years Saturday night when he edged Gabriel Moreno of Urbandale, 6-5, for the Class 3A 145-pound crown at Wells Fargo Arena.

"I've done it. I've finally done it," an exuberant Witte declared. "Wow. Wow is all I've got."

Wow was good enough.

Witte capped his perfect season with a 38-0 record and became Prairie's first state champion since Phil Sexton won the 140-pound crown for the Hawks in 2006.

Witte won the title in style. He defeated Chad Ryan, a 2010 state champion, in the semifinals in overtime Friday night. Then he nipped Moreno, who placed third at state in 2010, before a sellout crowd in Des Moines. Ryan, from Sioux City North, and Moreno were ranked 1-2 in the state coming to Des Moines, but Witte will be ranked No.1 heading out of town.

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"Boy," said Prairie Coach Blake Williams. "A tough bracket like that, a lot of good kids, those two matches back to back.

"A long time coming," said Williams. "I told him, it's been a long time. Two years. Take advantage of the opportunity. It's here, and you're ready."

Witte raced toward Williams after the match ended and jumped into his coach's arms. They squeezed each other in joy.

"This is what I wanted all year long and I'm so glad I achieved my goal," said Witte, joy written all over his face. "This will be a memory forever."

Witte finished second in the 2009 state tournament as a freshman behind Jake Ballweg of Waverly-Shell Rock. But he got stuck in a tough district last year, finished third in the state-qualifying meet and didn't make it to Des Moines.

The wrestlers who finished 1-2 in that district last year -- Cody Caldwell of Waverly-Shell Rock and Gustavo Moreno of Marshalltown -- also finished 1-2 at state in 2010, but Witte didn't let anyone get in his way this year.

Williams thinks Witte may have been a little shocked to reach the state finals as a freshman in 2009, but he thinks that experience helped him this year.

"All week and even tonight, he stayed loose. And it makes a big difference," said Williams.

The inside of Witte's lower lip was bloody and raw Saturday night, but he didn't seem to notice or care. "I guess winning the close matches, that happens," he said with a grin.

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Moreno (40-2) grabbed a 2-0 lead with a quick takedown, but Witte escaped and dove into Moreno for a takedown of his own. The match was tied, 3-3, after one period.

Moreno escaped for a 4-3 lead in the second period. Witte got another takedown, but Moreno escaped again and it was 5-5 after two periods.

Witte escaped to start the third period for a 6-5 lead, and the rest of the contest was a physical pawing match as both wrestlers battled for an advantage.

Witte hung on, barely at times, and claimed the title.

"Wow," he said for about the 10th time.

Chapter 4: Witte is just a junior. He's got another season to go.

Keep reading. This book isn't finished yet.