

## Best prep sport in Metro? Try wrestling

Written by Jim Ecker

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Wrestling has been the most successful sport in the Metro area this season for high school teams.

Nothing else is close.

There are some outstanding bowlers and bowling teams in the area. There are some excellent basketball players and a few good squads. And the Cedar Rapids Washington boys swim team just finished second in the state meet.

But for consistent excellence, wrestling tops the charts this year.

The Linn-Mar, Prairie and Jefferson wrestling teams are all ranked in the Top 10 heading into the state tournaments this week. Prairie and Jefferson won district titles Saturday, and Metro wrestlers won 16 individual district crowns.

Linn-Mar, Jefferson and Prairie will compete in the State Dual Team Tournament Wednesday in Des Moines, and all three schools will have sizeable contingents in the individual state meet that starts Thursday.

Jefferson is enjoying its best season in 20 years. Linn-Mar and Prairie have ranked among the best teams in the state for many years now and this season is no exception, although both

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teams wish they could have qualified more grapplers for state.

The Linn-Mar Lions qualified seven men for Des Moines, but injuries put two other top wrestlers on the shelf. Prairie qualified six wrestlers for the state meet, but several other quality performers placed third at the district meet and did not qualify for the eight-mat circus at Wells Fargo Arena.

Jefferson has been the feel-good story of the year. The J-Hawks have been strong all season and qualified seven wrestlers for the state meet, including district champs Brenden Baker and Josh Allen.

Marcus England, Sam Uthoff, Josh Wenger, Trey Blaha and Skyler St.John won district titles for Prairie. Alijah Jeffery, Damon Griffin, Ross Lembeck and Shea Hartzler claimed district titles for Linn-Mar.

The Xavier Saints made a strong statement at the local district meet Saturday when Clint Lembeck, Nick Drahozal, Sean Ickes and Cole Turner won titles. Kennedy also claimed a district crown with Nolan Hromidko.

All told, the Metro area will have 27 wrestlers at the individual state meet that begins on Thursday. Baker (106), Jeffery (120) and Ross Lembeck (152) are ranked No.1 in their weight class and many others are ranked in the top 10.

The four-day extravaganza begins Wednesday at 9 a.m. with the State Dual Meet Tournament. Linn-Mar and Prairie bump heads in the quarterfinals, while Jefferson tangles with powerful Waverly-Shell Rock.

It will be interesting to see how the Metro teams approach the state duals. Linn-Mar and Prairie have elected to rest many of their top guys the last two years, preferring to wait for the individual tournament that starts the next day. They might be inclined to do the same thing this year to protect injured athletes.

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Jefferson, on the other hand, might be tempted to put its best lineup on the mat Wednesday against Waverly-Shell Rock and go for broke, which could pay big dividends if Waverly-Shell Rock holds back.

In any case, it's been a terrific year for high school wrestling in the Metro area and this week's tournaments in Des Moines could be the crowning achievement.