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High School Season Review

Blair, St. Ed, Carl Sandburg Ill. Top Rankings

By Bob Preusse

The race for the mythical national title had a familiar look this season, as mighty No. 1 Blair Academy, N.J. prevailed at both the Ironman and the Beast of the East in December. It wasn't easy as Blair survived a nail-biter at the Ironman; then survived another nail-biting dual meet with No. 2 St. Edward, Ohio in late January. St. Edward started the year slowly, with nine new starters, but by the last month of the season was almost on par with Blair. Carl Sandburg, III. dominated their rugged state and earned a No. 3 ranking.

As usual, over the past five seasons, the drama turned to the mythical PUBLIC school national championship. That race stayed tight, as always, until the last state tournament was over. When all was said and done, Carl Sandberg, Ill., ranked only No. 25 preseason, put together an improbable and magical season to claim the No. 3 ranking in the AWN Prep 40; the highest ranked public school in the nation. To claim the title, Sandburg won the toughest in-state event, the Dvorak tournament in Illinois just before Christmas; then the nation's toughest dual meet tournament this season, the Clash in Minnesota; then prevailed against all comers during the regular season in their rugged state; then capped it off by winning the big school class AA state (dual meet) title, despite two major late season injuries.

Carl Sandberg's assistant coach is Eric Siebert. If the name sounds familiar, Siebert was the NCAA champion for the University of Illinois in 1998 at 150 pounds. He has been coaching and teaching at Sandburg for seven years. Says Siebert, "We knew with our talent and experience that we could win a very competitive Illinois. As strong as our state was this past season, we knew that could very well mean a top five finish (nationally). Our kids responded in some very adverse situations and have a lot to be proud of." Beware of Sandburg next year, too, as they return 11 starters, including "three or four potential state champs," says Siebert.

Let's go back and see how the season transpired, the highlights and the surprises. As usual, the ASICS Ironman in Ohio kicked things off with a bang on December 9-10, at Walsh

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Jesuit high school. This 32 team individual tournament sets the stage every season and this season was no different. In the final AWN Prep 40 poll, five of the top seven teams in the nation competed at the Ironman: Blair, St. Edward, Great Bridge, Va., St. Paris Graham, Ohio, and El Reno, Okla. On the first day in the first two rounds many seeded wrestlers were beaten. By the Saturday morning quarterfinals, a scintillating team race had developed between top ranked Blair and No. 4 Great Bridge.

The Ironman does some innovative things, one being mixing up the order of the finals, with the best or most important weight classes last. The director thought that perhaps the most important match might be for first place at 125 pounds, featuring No. 4 Cameron Doggett of St. Paris Graham vs. No. 7 Jordan Frishkorn of Great Bridge. After all the other wrestling was completed, this match remained. Blair had a 5.5 point lead over Great Bridge. Winning the finals is worth four points, a pin is worth two more points. This unlikely event was what had to occur for Great Bridge to overtake Blair by one-half point and win the Ironman. The stage was set for high drama.

The SRO crowd was on it's feet, the noise in the high school gym was deafening. The 125 pound match was tied at 2-2 at the end of regulation. In overtime, Doggett attacked Frishkorn's leg. And Frishkorn answered by setting up a "Peterson hold" almost to perfection; putting Doggett on his back for a five point takedown and nearfall. But not quite a pin as Doggett fought off his back. Final score Frishkorn wins 7-2; and Blair prevails over Great Bridge 213.5 points to 212.

In other early season action, on December 3-4 at the DeSota Invitational in Florida, involving two preseason top 10 teams, Brandon, Fla. edged Easton, Pa, 287-278.5. Brandon had six champs and one runnerup while Easton had five champs and two runnersup. Two of Brandon's starters did not make weight, while Easton's good 215 pounder was still playing football. Oviedo, Fla., the state's second best team, was meanwhile winning easily the Winter Springs Duals in Florida and the Kennesaw Duals in Ga. Oviedo would go undefeated this season while Brandon would journey north before Christmas to test a mighty field at the Beast.

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This led to season long speculation as to why the states two best teams would never meet each other? In northern and western powerhouse states, the best teams meet each other constantly.

Meanwhile in Minnesota, Owatonna was establishing itself as perhaps the team to beat in a state with a handful of strong teams this season. On December 10, Owatonna, coached by veteran Scot Davis, overpowered a good Albert Lea team, 40-3. The outlook would be clearer after the Clash dual meet tournament on December 30-31 in Rochester, Minn. All the best Minnesota teams would be there plus out of state powers Carl Sandburg, Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., Glenbard North, Ill., and Wasatch, Utah.

At the 80-team Beast of the East in Newark, Del. on December 18-19, Blair secured their top ranking this time with a more convincing win over second place Great Bridge, 213.5 points to 172 points; with St. Paris third with 166.5, Brandon fourth with 154, Parkersburg W. Va fifth with 128, Massillon Perry sixth with 124.5, Upper Perkiomen Pa. seventh with 121, and Christiansburg Va, eighth with 115.5 points. A very young St. Edward team left two of its best wrestlers at home and came in only ninth with 111.5 points, but St. Eds would yet be heard from the last month of the season.

In the Beast's marquis weight class, 189 pounds, Mike Pucillo of Walsh Jesuit, Ohio beat Dennis Drury of Pennsylvania, 12-3 in the quarterfinals; pinned then No. 1 ranked Patrick Bond of Great Bridge in overtime in the semis. Then in the finals, Pucillo beat Hudson Taylor of Blair, 8-4, to avenge what would be his only loss of the season (by a 4-2 count in the semis of the Ironman). For his efforts, Pucillo was named OW. In early April, Pucillo would continue his domination with a 6-3 win over the best upper weight in the far west, Jake Varner of California, in the finals of the NHSCA Senior nationals.

The west's top tournament was the 100-team Reno T of C held on December 20-21. Tournament president Ross Aguiar and his crew do a terrific job with this extravaganza, held in the Livestock Event Center. They host a top notch college tournament the day before the high school. NCAA champion Oklahoma State would win that event this season.

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Easton, Pa. once again won Reno, unbelievably, their fourth win in its 10 year history. It was down to the wire as the Red Rovers edged two-time Reno champ Wasatch, Utah, 187.5-183.5. Young guns Rio Rancho, N.M, only an all right dual meet team, but a great tournament team, took third with 173 points. Fourth was Ponca City, Okla. with 172, then California state champ Poway with 169, Bakersfield, Calif. with 160, and Broken Arrow, Okla. with 155. Ponderosa, Colo. took eighth with 152 points; the week before Ponderosa took 17th at the Ironman. Coach Tim Ottmann of Ponderosa has a very ambitious schedule; this is the second year in a row his team has wrestled these two rugged tournaments on different coasts back to back.. Two AWW No. 1 ranked kids wrestled this season at Reno: Cyler Sanderson of Wasatch won at 140 and Jared Rosholt of Ponca City won at 215 pounds. Standout 189 pounder Jake Varner of Bakersfield won his weight class. The OW of the NHSCA Juniors tournament, Billy Murphy of Hughson, Calif. won at 130 pounds.

All eyes were on the Medina Ohio Holiday Invitational on December 27-28. High school wrestling legends Brent Metcalf of Davison, Mich. and Dustin Schlatter of Massillon Perry, Ohio would meet in a much anticipated match in the 145 pound finals. These are the two of the greatest high school middle weights of all-time. Metcalf would prevail this time, 4-3 in SDOT rideout. But on April 3, in the finals of the NHSCA Senior nationals tournament in Cleveland, Schlatter would get revenge, again by a 4-3 score. In the team race at Medina, St. Edward edged powerful Davison 280.5 points to 253.5, with Massillon Perry taking third with 163.5 points.

The Schlatter vs. Metcalf confrontation begs the question as to who are the nation's TOP SENIORS this season? Besides these two, I would list the only two wrestlers to win BOTH Junior national freestyle last summer and Senior nationals this April. This rare feat was accomplished by 125 pound Troy Nickerson of New York and 152 pound Matt Coughlin of Indiana. In my opinion these are the top four seniors this year in no particular order. For the record, last year only two seniors won both events: 135 pound J. Jagers of Ohio and 152 pound Mike Poeta of Illinois.

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On December 30-31, at the Clash dual meet tournament in Minnesota, the first day of competition witnessed a stunning event as Owatonna snapped rival Apple Valley's streak of 199 consecutive wins over in-state competition, 40-24. Owatonna won eight of the 14 matches, five by pin. The top four teams were put into one pool to wrestle-off for the title: Owatonna, Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., Carl Sandburg, and Wasatch, Utah. Owatonna beat defending Clash champion Wasatch, 40-24, and Wisconsin Rapids, 28-16. Carl Sandberg beat Wasatch, 35-24, and Owatonna, 31-18. Wisconsin Rapids gave Carl Sandberg their only loss of the season, 30-26. Owatonna and Carl Sandberg both went two and one in the pool; Wasatch and Wisconsin Rapids both went one and two. Because Carl Sandberg beat Owatonna head to head, Sandberg was declared the champion. Wasatch took third place with a win over Wisconsin Rapids, 32-28. Apple Valley took fifth.

After the smoke cleared from the great December tournaments, with big wins at Illinois' toughest event the Dvorak, and now the Clash, Carl Sandburg was getting noticed. On January 3, the AWN poll now had No. 1 Blair, No. 2 Great Bridge, No. 3 St. Paris, No. 4 Brandon, No. 5 Easton, No. 6 St. Edward, No. 7 El Reno, No. 8 Carl Sandberg, No. 9 Owatonna, and No. 10 Davison. Wasatch was No. 11, Wisconsin Rapids No. 16, and Apple Valley No. 17. Illinois teams were getting plenty of respect with No. 13 Chicago St. Rita, No. 14 Providence Catholic, and No. 23 Montini Catholic.

The stage was set for Carl Sandburg to make their run. Sandburg had not lost in Illinois going into the class AA big school state dual meet tournament, which is how Illinois decides their state champion. But many experts were convinced that this good fortune would not last. Two key starters had been lost to late season injuries. And now Sandburg had to face perennial powerhouse Providence Catholic not only in their sectional, but also in Providence's own gym. But Sandburg eaked out a 23-22 win, then eventually faced Glenbard North for the state title. Glenbard had knocked off Geneseo tournament champion, No. 13 Chicago St. Rita, 27-22 to reach the finals. Sandburg and Glenbard were tied going into the last match at 125 pounds, but Sandburg state champion Bradon Precin would win, 4-0, to complete a dream season. Sandburg moved closer to the top public school ranking, but events in Pennsylvania would have a lot to

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say about their final standing.

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Brandon was still in the hunt, but much depended on how Easton fared at state, since Brandon was riding on their win over Easton at the DeSoto tournament early in the season. Easton had already lost the class AAA big school state duals to Connellsville, 35-24, but was in the hunt to win the state tournament. However, Connellsville's success would continue as a flurry of upsets at a loaded 125 pound class in the first round would set the stage for their Steve Bell to win the weight. Easton's Reno champ Seth Ciasulli was upset, 4-3 in the first round. Steve Mytych of Northampton who had beaten Ciasulli two weeks in a row also lost in the first round, 8-6 in overtime. Bell emerged victorious in this weight class, winning 7-5 in overtime. Council Rock South had title hopes, but they took a big hit when nationally ranked Rick Rappo was beaten in the finals by sophomore Chris Sheetz of Upper Perkiomen, 3-2.

With three teams in virtually a dead heat, Connellsville made their move when Ashtin Primus not only won, but pinned in his 135 pound finals match. Those two points for the pin, put Connellsville one point ahead of Easton and tied with Council Rock South for the state title with 68 points apiece, to go along with their dual meet title. Up until state duals, Connellsville had a good, but undistinguished season. They had finished 13th at the Beast, second at the Powerade, and had lost duals to both Kiski Area Pa. and No. 19 Upper Perkiomen Pa. But winning both state duals and tournament put a gleam on their season and vaulted them to the AWN No. 9 ranking in the final poll, one spot ahead of Easton.

No. 4 Great Bridge, runnersup at the nation's two toughest events, the Ironman and the Beast, would not fare well at the Final Four duals in Easton, Pa. on January 22; losing decisively to both Blair, 42-13, and Easton, 33-24. So, Great Bridge was out of the hunt for public school supremacy. El Reno was dominating Oklahoma, winning their 10th straight class 4A state title; and beating the top two class 5A schools Ponca City and Broken Arrow in duals. But El Reno's fifth place at the Ironman precluded them from higher than No. 7. At No. 8 was Owatonna, Minn., who had just won their big school state duals title, beating Apple Valley in the semis and Simley in the finals, 37-17. But Carl Sandburg had beaten Owatonna at the Clash.

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In late January, St. Edward removed No. 5 St. Paris Graham from consideration as the top public school (yes, St. Paris is a "public" school) by whipping St. Paris, 48-12 in their dual for Ohio supremacy. Brandon, conqueror of Easton at the DeSoto in early December, would run away with their class 2A state tournament in Florida scoring 235 points to second place Venice's 95. Brandon, who had taken fourth at the Beast, crowned five champions. But Easton's fall from grace took its toll in the poll, as Brandon dropped to No. 6, while Carl Sandburg jumped from No. 5 to No. 3, the highest ranked public school.

No. 2 St. Edward would close out their season, by almost beating mighty Blair in a dual at home, but Blair won 27-23. St Eds would take it out on the rest of the state, scoring a record 209.5 points in the Division I state tournament. St. Ed's loses only three starters and their biggest guns are back, setting the stage for a run to No. 1 perhaps next season. They will be challenged by Carl Sandburg, and perhaps Great Bridge, both of whom also return 11 starters.

Elsewhere around the nation, No. 25 Poway won the one class California state tournament over Bakersfield, 167-111. Remember the name Louis Bland of Modesto, a freshman who won state at 152 pounds, marking him for possible greatness. No Californian has ever won state as a freshman at a middle weight. No. 36 Ponderosa, Colo. breezed to their third consecutive state title in class 5A. In a much anticipated re-match at state, No. 3 at 112 Gabe Burak got revenge for a season loss to No. 10 Chris Martinez. Burak won in the finals, 9-6. In Delaware, fast rising No. 31 Caesar Rodney dominated St. Mark, 52-10, in Division I duals, to win their third straight title. Eagle Idaho won their third straight state class 5A title, 230 to 180, over Idaho Falls. At 130 pounds for Eagle, Vance Beeson won his fourth state title.

In Wisconsin, No. 14 Wisconsin Rapids, fourth at the Clash, won state duals again in Division I. AWN No. 3 Max Askren of Hartland struggled in the finals, winning only 7-6, for his first state title. Askren, however, took third at NHSCA Senior nationals and was runnerup in Junior nationals freestyle last summer. In possibly the most underrated wrestling state, Utah, AWN No. 12 Wasatch, third at the Clash and runnerup at Reno, again won class 3A as Cyler

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Sanderson won his third state title. Viewmont won class 5A again and Box Elder won 4A.

In Indiana, No. 32 Lawrence North beat Evansville Mater Dei, 36-23, to get to the state finals; then beat Avon, 48-17 to win it. No. 3 at 130 Reece Humphrey of Lawrence won his third state title, he will wrestle for Ohio State. No. 2 at 135, Angel Escobedo of Griffith won his fourth state title; he will wrestle for Indiana University as will 152 pound champion, No. 1 Matt Coughlin of Mater Dei. In New York, No. 37 Valley Central avenged a 33-25 dual meet loss to Islip by outscoring them, 129-78, at state. Both teams crowned three state champions. Team New York then won NHSCA Senior nationals to prove this state is one of the top 10 nationally.

The two most underrated programs, and two of the fiercest rivals, in America battled it out for top honors in West Virginia as AWN No. 24 Parkerburg South beat No. 25 Parkersburg easily to win state, 277-162. The Mountaineer state has some great individuals this season, including No. 2 at 171 pounds Chance Litton and No. 3 at 135 pounds Brandon Rader both of Parkersburg; and three time state champ Anthony Easter of Nitro at 119 pounds. In Washington, Sedro Wooley won state over Lake Stevens in class 3A. Each team had three state champions. In 3A Kyle Bounds of Vancouver Columbia River and in 2A Bradley Muri of Steilcom both won their state title. In Tennessee, Bradley Central and Franklin battled for state honors. Franklin won state duals over Bradley, 32-31, in Division I. But at the state tournament, Bradley took top honors over Franklin, 207-194.5.

It has been another great season; here in the snowy north it got us through a very bitter winter! Starting with a report on Junior nationals in our September issue, come back next season and we will do it all over again. (Contact Bob Preusse at fax/ph 216-941-7956 or mail@amateurwrestlingnews.com)

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