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PRAIRIE COACHING DUO
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By KERRY SHERMAN
Youth is being served at South Baca, as the Patriots girls basketball team is rolling their way to a potential state tournament appearance, with just one senior on the roster. Two seasons since they last danced at the state event, the Patriots are led by a core group of juniors, who contributed to a third place finish in 2016-17.

Coach Tom Jacobs lost a number of seniors from that squad, and the team had to endure some growing pains last year, going 14-10. “During the season, we only lost two games by more than 10 points, I believe,” Jacobs said. “Those two losses were to a very good Kim team, who ended up number two in the state.” Another one of the losses came in regionals to the eventual state champion, Kit Carson. Jacobs felt that his team was in all of the games, with the exception of those two.

Setting the stage for this year’s perfect run (18-0 entering the District 3 final) was a commitment to the summer program. “The policy is to play summer ball during the month of June. In the late part of June we played at a tournament in Alamosa, and did very well. We actually won it. That’s when I felt like we grew as a team. Some of the girls found their roles. The now juniors have shown great leadership in getting the sophomores and freshmen up to speed, and that’s what is special and key to this team,” Jacobs stated.

Those juniors are Delaney Eskew, Patience Crane, and Alison Wilson. They combine for around 29 points a game, with Eskew sharing the team lead at nearly 12 a contest with sophomore Alissa Hebberd. Wilson adds almost seven points per game. They do a lot more than just score for South Baca. They are the top three in assists, combining for better than nine a game. And they make up three of the top four in steals.

The Patriots did not make going undefeated a specific goal, but it has happened because of their mindset. “We wanted to take it one game at a time and see where we ended up,” Jacobs noted. As of late February, it has led them to being one of only two teams in the state without a loss, and only a couple of wins away from another state tournament berth.

The Patriots reached the finals of the district tournament where they will meet Wiley for the district title. Regardless of the outcome, South Baca will advance to regionals March 1st and 2nd at La Junta High School. Complete tournament pairings were not available at press time.
By DAN MOHRMANN
Tony Lorince still remembers what the radio broadcasters kept saying during the game. He didn’t hear it live but he listened to the tape later—a tape he still has in his possession. As Walsh and Arriba squared off for the 1971 Class A basketball championship, the radio waves were filled with confusion.

"Don’t these Arriba boys know they’re supposed to get thumped," Lorince recalls from the tape.

He said they didn’t. Arriba thought it was every bit as good as Walsh. For three quarters they were right. But Walsh came away with 101-92 win. The 193 combined points still stands as the most points ever scored in a state basketball championship game.
“It was a 2-2-1 full court press to the opening tip and a fast break offense, so it was up and down the floor like a track meet,” Steve Cogburn said. “The thing about Arriba is that they played the same way we did, and they matched us bucket for bucket. We won the game, but it was just up and down the floor. It was a heck of a game.”

Just a few years earlier, Walsh had been more of a technically sound basketball team. Dan Kersay, the Walsh coach at the time, was big on fundamentals and technique. Then Leo Page came along, and things got interesting.

“He was a statistics man,” Cogburn said. “Leo would point out that if you shot the ball 100 times and you made an average of 30 percent of the shots, that’s 60 points. If you were going to shoot 200 times that’s 120 points. Our philosophy was to come in and shoot. Even on a made shot we were on the run.”

Shoot fast, shoot often and attack the other team defensively with a full-court press. That was the way the Eagles played basketball that year and according to Cogburn and his friend and teammate Les McKinley, it was a fun way to play the game. It was also a much different version of high school basketball that is played today.

“We averaged 100 points a game in state and 105 in league,” McKinley said. “You don’t see that much anymore. Besides the dress, I just don’t think you see the game geared more toward offense anymore. It seems to me that defense plays such a bigger part in the game now.”

Much like the radio broadcast that Lorince listens to every now and then, McKinley thought the Eagles were supposed to make a statement in that championship game.

Leading up to it, he and the rest of the starters would do their thing on the floor and then depart the floor and let the second-teamers have at it. And the productivity never took a dip. Not only was Walsh a talented team, but they had the depth needed to claim championship gold.

“We had to 10 guys, gosh I remember a game where the first five guys played the first four minutes of the first quarter and scored 24 points,” McKinley said. “Then the second five went in with four minutes left and scored 20. We had 10 guys that were very solid.”

It was hard for Cogburn to remember specifics of the game in the sense of who scored how many points. But McKinley – Walsh’s leading scorer – will confidently say that he scored 28 in that game. He says he read one report of the game that claimed he had 26, but he’s

gone back and watched the replay and counts 28. He, Cogburn and even some of the Arriba players pitched in money to have the game transferred from reel to reel film to a VHS tape. It was an expensive process at the time.

When they watch that game it brings back fond memories. Even for someone like Lorince who played for the losing team, it helps him remember an atmosphere that none of those boys had experienced until that day.

“By about halftime, everybody on the court knew what we were up against,” he said. “The auditorium arena was pretty full. By the time the second half started at full pace, everybody was raucous in that place. It encapsulated everyone. Either team would do something good and there’d be a noise that all the small-town guys had never heard before.”

Perhaps the most unfortunate part of the day for Arriba is that they could’ve been that team that everyone recalls as dominant. They were almost every bit as talented as Walsh, but just couldn’t get the job done. They just couldn’t overcome what was an exceptional group of athletes.

“Any other time we probably run away with it,” Lorince said. “They were a bunch of talented guys. And they were strong.”

That was apparent the next school year when Walsh claimed what was then the triple crown of state champions. They won the 1971 football championship, repeated as basketball champions and then claimed the track title in the spring of 1972.

The 1972 basketball championship team needed just 69 points to beat Eads. And while that team is most fondly remembered as one leg of that triple crown year, the 1971 team will always stand out for its ability to score. It gave the state of Colorado one of the most exciting championship games in history. And with the way defense has to come into play this day in age, the 193 combined points is a record that figures to stand for a long time.

NOTE: A huge THANK YOU to Steve Cogburn, Curtis Bryan, Ryan and Alissa Renquist for all their work in collecting newspaper articles, pictures, game programs and statistics from the 1971 record-setting state championship contest.
By JON YUNT

Ben Miltenberger has forgotten more basketball that most of us have seen.

And anybody associated with small school basketball on the Eastern Plains has at one time crossed paths with a Miltenberger, be it in their home base in Stratton or any one of the many brilliant venues from the Nebraska border in the North to the Oklahoma and New Mexico border to the South.

Ben Miltenberger, a 1953 graduate of Stratton, has been to the Class 1A state tournament so many times that he has lost count, but those in the know estimate it to be upward of 50-60 trips. And that isn’t easy for a man who makes his living as a farmer to venture to the Front Range—be it Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Greeley or Loveland—for three days worth of games.

“It was always just a lot of fun. We had good teachers, good coaches and good parents; and we always just had a lot of fun back in our day,” said Miltenberger, now 84 and still making his home eight miles from the Stratton gym. “And when we had kids, we would always take them to the state tournament.”

And there was an obvious impression that those trips made on the Miltenberger children: Tom, Patsy, Mary, Dan and Mike. All five of them went on to play in state tournaments and the latter four—who we are positive don’t let the oldest sibling hear about it—have all won state titles.
“He sacrificed a lot. Leaving the family farm to come and support and watch us play,” Dan Miltenberger said. “He always loved sports and he was competitive growing up.”

Ben Miltenberger never won a state title in his days with the Eagles, but understood what it took to challenge the best in the state.

His oldest son, Tom excelled on the football field and was the first of the five Miltenberger kids to all earn all-state honors.

It wasn’t until 1988 that the family got its first championship. Patsy and Mary were a part of an Eagles team that were seeded No. 7 going into the eight-team Class A-II tournament at the Air Force Academy’s Clune Arena.

“I remember they beat the No. 2 team, Merino, and then they played the No. 3 team and I can’t quite remember who that was,” Ben recalled. “And then they met the No. 1 team (Ridgway) for the championship and we started two seniors, a junior and two freshmen on that team.”

That team went on beat the Western Slope’s Demons 49-35 for the title.

Two years later, the boys earned a trip to the A-II back in Colorado Springs and knew they were going to have their hands full in a tournament that featured Manuel Gonzales’ undefeated Granada team that was led by the dynamic junior duo of Alfred Montez and Kelly Dorenkamp.

The bracket held true to form and the Bobcats and Eagles met for the title. And it was a game that lived up to its billing.

“They were 34-0 and the defending state champs,” said Dan Miltenberger, who recalls several duels with Gonzales’ teams, including every detail of that 1990 classic. “We finally got them.

“Spence Huppert made two free throws with two seconds left to beat them 69-67.”

Dan and Mike were back with the Eagles, under the guidance of Greg King, at the tournament again in 1992. As seniors, they were the heart and soul of the Stratton team that beat Kit Carson in the
1A final.

“Dad always preached free throws and how they win games,” said Dan, who watched his brother win 1A Player of the Year honors that season. “And I shot 14-for-14 through the state tournament.

“And to have him witness it was a pretty big deal.”

Said Ben: “I think that is still a state record in 1A!”

It wasn’t the last of the state titles for the Miltenberger clan either. Just five years ago, Tom Miltenberger’s son Justin was a part of the Hi-Plains team that beat Caliche 52-51 at the Budweiser Events Center in Loveland to win it all. Ironically, it was Justin’s clutch free throws in the late going that made the difference.

It was also the last state tournament that Ben, who has had to have his hip replaced and has trouble getting around these days, made it to.

Even with the bum wheel, Ben never stopped going to games and always tried to be there in support of his family.

“So Dad was using a walker to get around. Mike was a senior and playing regionals in Strasburg. My mom (Pauline) had driven them to the game and dropped him off at the front door,” Dan said. “Being so into the game in his mind, he got out of the car, walked in and paid the admission fee. Headed into the gym and just took his seat.

“It wasn’t until he got settled that he realized he had left his walker in the car. That’s how mom and dad were to all of us kids at basketball games.”

Hi-Plains’ longtime athletic director Kerry Sayles crossed paths with Ben in 2014 and always the story teller, passed on his love of the game to his grandson when he was just three or four years old.

“He told me that he would take Justin up to the basketball games

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and he would sit there and watch eight basketball games in a day," Sayles said. "It's a family thing for sure."

Miltenberger is certainly unique in the number of games and state tournaments he has attended, but every community on the Eastern Plains has that family that is a constant at all of the school's sporting events.

"He's a farmer and he's got cattle, it's not like he is working that 9-to-5 job," Sayles said. "He had to plan this like a vacation."

At 84, Ben doesn't get out to nearly as many games as he used to, but old habits die hard and he and Pauline still make the occasional trip out, but nowadays it is across the state line and into Kansas.

The latest, Sierra Jellison (Patsy's youngest daughter) is a 5-foot-7 freshman who has played in all 20 games for the 18-2 South Central Timberwolves in Coldwater, Kansas.

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In basketball, a cohesive group can win a lot of games. What happens when two separate teams are merged into one though? Pawnee and Prairie know all about it as they formed a new co-op program for the boys.

“Obviously I was the head coach at Grover, and if we hadn’t combined with Prairie this year, we only would’ve had about five or six kids,” Danielle Zehnder said. “That was a difficult decision to begin with, whether or not to keep our team or to co-op with another team.”

The merge happened and many student-athletes who had played on the Prairie football team together now joined forces in basketball, allowing for a bit smoother transition period. Zehnder and Amber Whitlock teamed up as a coaching staff as well.

“Her basketball mind is a lot like mine, so we work really well together,” Whitlock said.

Before the season got underway, Whitlock told the former Pawnee coach that although her title was that of assistant coach, the two should work together in more of a co-head coaching style.

“I wanted her input and I wanted everything that she was thinking,” Whitlock said. “The bond I’ve got with her, it’s been pretty cool. We like that uptempo, press, and fast break style.”

Amber Whitlock (right) and Danielle Zehnder (left) lead the basketball co-op program at Prairie which includes players from Pawnee. Roz Long

The cohesion has led to a number of wins (14-6 record) for the program. The most notable victory was a 64-61 triumph at Peetz, which paved the way for a co-championship between the two schools in the 1A North Central. The Mustangs and Bulldogs finished with identical 7-1 conference records, but Peetz won the first contest 62-59 in December.

“We’ve got a solid eight to 10 players,” Zehnder said. “Each player on the team has brought something different and I think that’s a factor. We’ve got shooters, we’ve got great inside post players and everyone on that end has come together.”

Devin Littlefield has been a scoring threat while averaging 16.9 points per game. The senior tallied a season-high 26 points in two contests, which included the monumental win over Peetz.

“Devin Littlefield has been a scoring threat while averaging 16.9 points per game. The senior tallied a season-high 26 points in two contests, which included the monumental win over Peetz.”

6-foot-4 Jade Cass has accounted for 10.2 points, 8.4 rebounds, and 3.4 assists each night. The senior presence switched from Pawnee to Prairie colors, as did guard Logan Cacciola (8.7 ppg). Trey Moore (5.8 ppg) has been a key player in a supporting
role.

Although the program has had some recent lofty success, they claimed the district championship in 2015 and had 16 victories during Whitlock’s first season, the Mustangs have also been on the losing end more often than not the past three campaigns. They won four games for two straight seasons before trending upwards again with a 7-3 conference record (8-12 overall) last season. With the combination of players from both schools giving Prairie a lift, the Mustangs earned a league title for the first time in over 20 years.

Several other storylines could be written about this unique group. In boys basketball, the coaching profession has mostly been dominated by males. That is beginning to change, even if it is gradual change. Becky Hammon, the former All-American for Colorado State University, is an assistant coach for the San Antonio Spurs.

Amber Whitlock and Danielle Zehnder have broken rather new ground at the prep level.

“As a male, you don’t normally see female coaches in basketball,” Zehnder noted. “That’s really something the boys have become accustomed to. With both coaches, the boys are really respectful. They understand our background and how much we have loved basketball. Amber and I both played since we were little, then through high school, and both of us in college.”

Whitlock, a 1A state champion in 2001 as a Prairie player, suited up for Northeastern Junior College and eventually the University of Nebraska Kearney. Zehnder, a Platte Valley graduate, competed for Western Colorado University. They each have years of experience as both players and coaches. On top of that, Whitlock has deep ties to the area.

“That’s where mom graduated, my brother graduated, grandma drove the bus, and grandpa was on the school board,” she said. “It’s been pretty cool to come back to Prairie and be a part of the program, the community and these kids’ lives. To do it at my alma mater, it makes it a little more special probably than at other schools.”
DEER TRAIL PLAYS FINAL GAMES IN EVERITT L. DAVIS GYMNASIUM
By STEVEN VETTER

After just over 51/2 decades, including a banner year in the mid-1980s, the Deer Trail School District hosted its final set of competitive games in Everitt L. Davis Gymnasium Feb. 15.

The night was celebrated by current and past Eagle athletes, who posed for a picture at center court at halftime of the boys’ game against Stratton/Liberty.

The gym first opened in 1962 and was named after longtime school bus driver and custodian Everitt Davis. In addition to being the home of the 1986 Class A Volleyball and Class A Girls Basketball State Champions, the building has seen 651 seniors walk across its stage at graduation time.

The Eagles are set to move into a brand new school for the 2019-20 school year, including a new indoor athletic facility.
By DAN MOHRMANN

One thing is clear about the massive man that was running around the beaches of Los Angeles in early 2019. He looked out of place. It was a much different feeling for former Wiggins Tiger Dalton Risner. Through high school and even in his time as a standout offensive lineman at Kansas State, he looked like he was right where he belonged.

Out in Hollywood, that feeling couldn't be further from the truth. “Let’s just be honest, I don’t fit in out here,” Risner says with a laugh. “I stick out like a sore thumb. The weather has been decent. I’m going to the beach and working out on the beach and it’s just the Cali lifestyle. I can’t say I don’t like it because I do. It’s definitely a change for me coming from small town Wiggins, to Manhattan, Kansas to Los Angeles.”

His time in L.A. is just a means to an end. Since he was in eighth grade Risner has been working, grinding and fighting to reach the new levels of competition. He battled it out on the football field, the basketball court and the track at Wiggins.

But it wasn’t just sports and school. The large man from the small town in northeast Colorado was a worker from day one. He grew up on a farm meaning that hours before his first high school class of the day started, he was up and working on chores.

“Every morning I would wake up before school, probably around 6 a.m., and I’d go out and make sure I fed the cattle, fed the horses,” Risner said. “We had grain, hay, I’d pitchfork some hay. I’d check the waters, clean the waters and make sure that was all good. I’d make sure no ice needed cracking if it was the winter. I did that for about 45 minutes then I’d head to school around 7:30.”

His life looks very different from those farm days. Risner is ready to take the next step of his life which hopefully comes in April when his name is called in the NFL Draft. It’s not just a pipe dream either. Draft analysts are high on Risner with some even guessing he can go in the second round.

“It’s something I’ve known has been coming,” Risner said. “I thought about leaving early last year so this process I knew was coming. You have to leave college at some point. I got to go to the Reese’s Senior Bowl and that was a huge step for me and so was heading to the combine.

“That was another big step in the process. Then you have the pro day, some visits and then it’s draft process. It has been a smooth transition because of how Kansas State shaped me and because of how I worked there and the types of coaches I had and what they demanded and the kind of man they molded me into.”

The Wildcats can’t claim that success on their own. Since he was a kid Risner has been molded to go into something that involves a lot of hard, physical work. If any of his buddies could’ve a guess through his childhood, they might’ve said farming. But it turns out his work in the stalls and on the field were just his foundation for something more.

And it instilled good habits. After going through some of his daily
chores, the task of snapping a football and protecting the quarter-back seem almost trivial.

“The way I was raised, we were always working for Dad,” Risner said. “I wasn’t inside playing video games, I was always working for my dad. I was walking around the rocks and the landscape pulling up weeds. I was digging out cactus from the fields. I have a lot of memories of picking up cactus in Wiggins and getting it out of the field.”

The story would make for a great screenplay if a college scout happened upon a farm in Wiggins, saw Risner and asked if he was a football player. But that’s not even close to how his recruitment went. He put in the work to get noticed. He knew that he had to stand out to college coaches and scouts because he didn’t have the advantage of coming from a big team in a metro area.

Risner credits his farming and ranching background for much of his success on the football field.
"They didn’t find me, I found K-State," Risner said. "That goes for every team. And I say that with a lot of pride. Coming from Wiggins, Colorado, no team came through to check out the talent. They never answered any of my emails. I had to go to 10 to 15 camps every summer with my dad, my brothers, my mom just to get in front of coaches. I’d have to press to them ‘hey, this is Dalton Risner I’m from this small town and want you to open my film and see it.’ I started doing that in my eighth-grade year. By my junior year teams had started to remember me."

What made the process that much harder was that he was an offensive lineman on a team that won just four games his senior year. But his persistence began to pay off. If there was one thing that stood out in the Tigers’ game film, it was the offensive lineman that was listed at 300 pounds.

Off to Manhattan he went. And his life began to change at that moment. He redshirted in 2014 but started all 13 games for the Wildcats in 2015. He started his career as a center, the same position he played in high school. As a sophomore he was moved to right tackle where he found a permanent spot. He also figures to play tackle in the NFL.

But as his football talent grew and his commitment to dominating the trenches for the Wildcats became stronger, he drifted further away from the very thing that established the foundation of his work ethic.

"I haven’t had time to farm in five years since I went to K-State," he said. "I get to go home once or twice a year and we still have cattle, but not as big time as we had."

He doesn’t say that with regrets. He also wouldn’t trade his experiences on the farm for anything. If he hadn’t worked in the fields, built barbwire fences and had to be up to feed the cattle each morning he might not be where he is today. It’s fitting that the big strong farmer would take that path as an offensive lineman in college and hopefully on to the NFL.

"That’s so true," Risner says with a laugh. "That’s something I haven’t thought about, but you look at these guys that grew up on a farm - these blue-collar guys - and they’re either a mike linebacker or an offensive lineman. When you look at the offensive line position you hear about how smart they are, how hard working they are and how tough they are. When I look at a farmer, I think that guy is tough, he knows how to work hard and he’s smart as heck at what he does. And I think it correlates."

It’s been a winning formula. He grew up as a farmer and fell in love with football. And because he had grown up with the mentality that tasks need to be completed, he took that very same approach to the football field.

It’s something that has stayed with him for his entire life and he doesn’t think that will ever change. He’s a competitor. And once a competitor has accomplished something he naturally looks toward
the next goal. But he can’t do that without appreciating what he has accomplished in each phase of his life.

“It’s human nature to always want more,” Risner said. “When I was in high school, I just wanted to play varsity football and be good at it. Once I did that, I just wanted to go to college. Once I got there, I just wanted to play. Once I played, I wanted to be the best. Once I became one of the best in college, I wanted to play in the NFL. That’s where I am now. Now I just want to make it, and if I make it then I’ll probably want to be a Pro Bowler. You always want more. I’m so big on taking the time to see how far I’ve come and be proud.”

Even if he gets that Pro Bowl status, even if he goes beyond that and becomes a prized free agent, Risner is still the same kid that was growing up. He has no desire to change just because there’s the possibility to put some money in his pocket.

He’s strong in his faith and has already established the Risner Up Foundation so that he can do good in the world at the same time he’s shoving defenders away from his quarterback. Those back home won’t be the first to wonder how Dalton Risner the multi-millionaire football player is going to be different from the farmer from Wiggins.

“I love that question. It was a question I was asked at the Senior Bowl and I’m sure I’ll be asked that question at the combine,” he said. “Let’s say I’m drafted by the New York Giants for example. I’m still Dalton Risner from Wiggins. I’m not going to get some money in my pocket and hold my chin above everyone else. I take a lot of pride in this. I want to be who I am and I don’t want to stray from my roots. If I have some more money in my pocket, I promise you that I am going to use that money for good.”

A five-minute conversation with Risner would erase any doubt in the validity of that statement. He’s kind kid who just happens to be a talented hog on the football field. He’s likely to land a professional football contract this spring. But make no mistake, Risner plans on living out his football career and beyond as the proud son of a farmer from Wiggins, Colorado.
Alone at the top. That characterized Wray High School’s run at the 2019 state tournament from the opening round on Thursday, Feb. 21 until they raised the team trophy on Saturday night for the second straight season.


“That’s quite the accomplishment for a small town school on the eastern plains.”

“Alone at the top. That characterized Wray High School’s run at the 2019 state tournament from the opening round on Thursday, Feb. 21 until they raised the team trophy on Saturday night for the second straight season.


That’s quite the accomplishment for a small town school on the eastern plains.

“Tarin and Rockwell won individual titles in 2018 before making another exciting trip to the final this year, while Hillman and Collins were making their first appearance in the championship.

Collins, a sophomore, won 50 matches in his 2019 campaign and is primed to come back hungry for more.

“I think it just shows how hard we work every day, I feel like we work as hard as anybody in the state,” Collins said. “It’s just really cool to be a part of something this special. It means everything.”

Thought it made for a slightly bittersweet championship celebration on the floor of Pepsi Center on Saturday night, the results only prove the importance of depth, chemistry, and fighting for every point at the state tournament.

“The seniors we have here were freshman when we had eight kids in the program,” Brown said. “They’re what turned the program around. It just kind of changed the culture.
“I’m not sure how we won (the title) by that much, it didn’t feel like it the way the finals went, but you have to look at the whole picture.”

A total of eight Eagles placed at the state tournament, including the four finalists and four others who cracked the top six: Cole Rockwell (3rd at 106), Emmanuel Huerta (4th at 152), Carson Berguis (6th at 195), and Jeron Lippert (4th at 285).

Wray had 18 pins and two technical falls over the course of the tournament, the highest bonus-point total of any team in Class 2A and second only to Pueblo East (4A) for the most across any division.

“I don’t know if it’s a higher standard or what, but they expect themselves to perform at that level,” Brown said. “They’re always looking for bonus points, and it’s fun to sit in the corner and watch them go.”

Of the 14 state qualifiers the Eagles had this year, 10 are coming back. That includes the Rockwell brothers, Collins, and others.

They say championship runs come in groups, and the Eagles are hoping they can continue riding this wave in the years to come.

But for now, the Class 2A state champions can sit back and enjoy the view from the top.

LOCAL INDIVIDUAL CHAMPIONS

One of the hardest things to do in a high school wrestling match is to ride your opponent for a full two minutes.

It’s an even more difficult task in the state finals.

For La Junta’s Isaiah Gamez, that assignment came calling during the Saturday night finals at the 2019 Class 3A state wrestling championships on Feb. 23 at Denver’s Pepsi Center.
He was up for the task.

Leading Lamar’s Ethan Andrade 1-0 in the 120-pound final, Gamez had two choices: he could voluntarily cut Andrade and take his chances on his feet.

Or he could try to ride—not just hang on, but ride. He chose the latter.

“It’s really hard,” Gamez said. “It’s a dog-fight being on top. (Andrade) has gotten out from me a lot before, it’s been easy for him to get out. But you just have to keep it together down there, you can’t put yourself in weird positions.

“It’s tiring, but you don’t get tired in the state finals. I just knew I could hold him.”

The ride secured a 1-0 victory and a second straight state title for Gamez, a junior for the Tigers.

His win not only brought him another gold medal, but it also brought him redemption. Andrade had beaten the defending champion twice before during the season, most recently in the finals of the regional qualifying tournament.

But this time, when the stakes were highest, Gamez was up for the challenge.

“This one is amazing,” Gamez said. “Last year was great, but to go out there and have to defend (the title), and not only that but it being against the kid that beat me twice, it’s amazing. It’s the sweetest one yet.”

Other Eastern Colorado wrestlers also turned in championship performances throughout the weekend. Here’s a rundown of the area wrestlers who brought home titles:
Seth McFall, Fowler – 2A 106
McFall won his second state title with a pin over Rye’s Cole Miller in 1 minute, 30 seconds. The Grizzly was awarded as the 2A outstanding wrestler in the lower weights for his efforts.

Zane Rankin, Lamar – 3A 132
The Lamar sophomore turned in the tournament of a lifetime en route to his first state championship. Rankin topped Jefferson’s Andrew Sansburn, the top seed, in the semis before edging Eagle Valley’s Lucas Comroe 5-3 in the final.

Louis Aguilar – Burlington – 2A 152
Aguilar claimed his first state title on Saturday night with a dominant performance from start to finish. The senior scored three falls during the tournament, including one in the finals, to claim the championship.

Jesse Tapia, Rocky Ford – 2A 195
Tapia’s path to his first state title was stress-inducing. Tapia won his last three matches by a combined five points, including a wild 13-11 thriller in the quarters and a 6-4 overtime victory over Paonia’s Anthony Felice in the final. A junior, Tapia will be back to defend his crown for the Meloneers next year.
Lamar High School freshman Crystalyn Felan became a part of Colorado High School girls’ sports history.

The first officially sanctioned Colorado High School Girls State Wrestling Tournament took center stage on Saturday, Feb. 9 at Thornton High School.

In its first year as an officially CHSAA pilot sport, over 70 girls made history by competing in the inaugural event.

At the conclusion of the tournament, 10 were crowned as the first officially recognized state champions.

Among those state champions was Felan, who captured the 111-pound state championship.

“Winning my championship match felt great but it was tough,” Felan said with a smile. “It really helped to have my family there to support me which meant a lot to me.”

Felan stands at only 4-9, but when she’s on the mat she’s a stick of dynamite.

She started wrestling in the fifth grade and was on the Lamar boys’ JV team this season.

Her brother Chris is a senior on the Lamar varsity team and qualified for the 3A state tournament at 220-pounds.

Felan picks up another win at the state tournament. 
Nick Jurney

On the road to her state crown, Felan drew a bye in her first match as her opponent failed to make weight.

In her next match, she won by a 13-1 major decision over Maya DeGraff of Denver North in the semifinals.

In the state championship match, Felan (9-0) squeezed out a 3-2 decision over senior Faith Herrera (21-6) of Skyview.

“It felt great winning my championship match but it was tough,” Felan said with a smile. “It really helped to have my family there to support me which meant a lot to me.”

Felan said that she likes wrestling more against boys than girls because it makes her a better wrestler.

Her coaches Austin Adamson and Andrew Williams were very pleased with the progress of this little dynamo.

“Crystalyn went up there to state very confident and wrestled very
tough,” praised Coach Williams. “She did what she needed to do to win. She’s mentally tough and not afraid of anybody. I was very proud of what she accomplished in her first year of wrestling at the high school level.”

Williams added that he was impressed with the quality of talent in the state tournament.

“It was really neat and my first time to watch an all girls’ tournament,” he said. “I was impressed with how far along a lot of girls were. For the most part, they were technical and solid wrestlers.”

Two regional qualifiers were held a week before the state tournament.

In Region 2, Felan earned the championship with an 8-6 decision against sophomore Saelah Pescevic (15-3) of Arapahoe.

By the time girls’ wrestling is a fully sanctioned sport, Felan will be a junior and could be a force to contend with at the state level.

“I love the sport of wrestling and can’t wait until next year,” said Felan.
By BROCK LAUE

According to CHSAANow.com, around 1,100 girls competed on Colorado prep swimming and diving teams in 1974. My, how times have changed. That number has quadrupled, something that helped spur a vision for the launch of 3A.

It seems it was only a matter of time.

"I think it’s a really good opportunity for these girls,” La Junta coach Lisa Korbitz said. "It’s something that had never been brought to the table before. The camaraderie between the 3A group itself is amazing."

The new division, still in its infancy, allows any school with 1,159 students or less to test the waters. That means Holyoke, a proud school tucked away in the northeast corner of Colorado, has a greater chance of qualifying athletes for the state meet. So does Fountain Valley and Eaton.

"It’s exciting to have a 3A division, because Holyoke is predominately just seasonal swimmers, which means they swim with me for 12 weeks and then I don’t see them again,” Holyoke coach Aly Brinkema said. "When a small school like ours, which is a total of 200 kids, offers a minority sport like swimming where typically something like basketball is the option for girls, it’s incredible to be able to bring them to the highest level."

During the state championships at the Edora Pool Ice Center in Fort Collins, held in early February, Brinkema and Korbiltz were ecstatic to see their programs compete in 3A once again. That’s not to say times weren’t swift. After all, a classification record was shattered by both Aspen and Pueblo County in the 200 freestyle relay. And a trio of swimmers—Evergreen’s Remi Gucker, Aspen’s Davy Brown, Erie’s Payten Irwin—won two individual crowns each.

Nevertheless, state cuts are more reachable in 3A and so are finals bids. Holyoke took advantage.

"This is the first season where Holyoke actually came to prelims and was able to make it back in the top 20 in several events," Brinkema said.

The team rode a wave of momentum that began Friday with a bid to the B final in the 200 medley relay. Traeli Hutches, Rylee Schneller, Lali Marquez, and Haley Van Overbeke nabbed a 12th place showing overall in a time of two minutes, 0.73 seconds. The same group finished 15th in the 400 free relay.

Just a sophomore, Schneller was also 19th individually in the 200 IM. Marquez, a junior, was 20th in the 100 butterfly. None of the state qualifiers for the Dragons, nor any other members of this year’s team were seniors.

But, who has the best credentials coming back? That would be Schneller. After all, she advanced to the championship final of the 100 breaststroke and touched the line in 10th (1:14.16). The Holyoke faithful, donned in forest green and white colors, was very proud. They had one of the largest and most noticeable cheering sections of any school despite their small enrollment.

"Our parents are amazing and a bunch of kids are here for this meet and it’s about two and a half to three hours away," Brinkema, with a dash of pride in her voice, said.
Holyoke could be in store for even greater success next season with their entire group back in the fold. Brinkema has been a centerpiece of the program’s success from the beginning as she was one of the original 11 swimmers on the school's inaugural team of 1997-1998. She was even a 4A state champion in the 100 freestyle her senior year. Interestingly, the head coach of the initial team was Brinkema’s mother, Adria Colver, who is now an assistant.

Another small school program that flourished this season was La Junta, thanks in large part to the Moreland sisters. Emily, the elder, was crowned a state champion in the 100 breaststroke with a winning time of 1:06.05. Evergreen’s Christina Crane was only .12 seconds behind.

“I knew Amanda Blickensderfer (Pueblo County, 4th) was going to be a really big competitor in that, so I knew I needed to stay in front of her,” Moreland said. “I had no idea that other girl (Crane) was so close.”

The margin was just enough for the senior to clinch her first state championship.

“Our team is really small,” Moreland added. “We only have 10 girls, so I’m just really happy I can do this for the girls on my team and do this for my coaches and for my parents. I just knew I needed to put my head down and give it all I had left.”

The 3A crown was extra special considering the challenges the program has faced in recent years.

“Our program got cut a couple years ago and families came together from all over and found a solution,” coach Lisa Korbitz said. “Lamar co-ops with La Junta and we’re the Arkansas Valley Tigers. We saved the team that way. This is really cool to show that even though we’re super small, there’s still big opportunities for them.”

The program now represents more of southeastern Colorado with athletes from multiple schools. With the creation of the Arkansas Valley group, Moreland was able to compete on the biggest stage and finished fourth in the 50 freestyle. Both sisters, Emily and Gracie, swam on a high-placing relay team, along with Isabel Gaines and Isabel Ball, in the 200 medley (4th, 1:55.38).

Emily Moreland will continue her sterling career at Colorado Mesa University. Gracie, on the other hand, was only a sophomore.

“This is her first year swimming,” Korbitz said. “She played basketball last year and then decided to swim this year with her sister. She was seeded fifth coming in and didn’t swim as well as she wanted to, but she came back from that top 10 and I told her it’s pretty awesome to be there. We’re looking forward to seeing what she can do the next two years.”

In her first-ever swim season, the sophomore finished ninth in the 100 backstroke in a time of 1:04.07. Isabel Gaines, a 19th place finisher in the 100 fly (1:05.30), is in the same grade. Despite the graduation of Emily Moreland, one of just a handful of La Junta swimmers to win an individual state title, the Tigers have the makings of another strong team next season.
The Indians celebrated their fifth softball championship last October with pitching coach Lonnie Loss, head coach Michelle Woodard and assistant Nicole Osentoski. Osentoski will take over the reins next Fall. Scott Gerrard
By DOUGLAS CLAUSSEN & STEVEN VETTER
THE I-70 SCOUT/EASTERN COLORADO NEWS

Even amidst the second-most dynastic run in Colorado 3A softball history and with little indication of a talent drain on the near horizon, Strasburg will look to continue its fall diamond dominance with a new person in charge next season.

The Strasburg School Board Jan. 9 accepted the resignation of Michelle Woodard, the Lady Indians coach for the past 11 years, which included the last seven 3A state title games, winning five. Since the 2012 season, only Arkansas Valley squads La Junta (2014) and Rocky Ford (2016) interrupted the Indians’ championship run.

According to Woodard, her decision to step away from the softball program but stay on as Strasburg’s athletic director was steeped in helping her family cope through their mother’s battle with breast cancer in Canada.

“It affected me tremendously, and so I just need to step back and take care of other things right now,” Woodard said. “(But) it gives me an opportunity now to mentor coaches in the fall. I haven’t been able to do that for our volleyball coach.”

Another one of the fall coaches Woodard will mentor is her replacement, three-year Strasburg assistant Nicole Osentoski, who was approved by the school board to take over the softball team the same night Woodard’s resignation was accepted. Prior to the personnel votes, Strasburg Superintendent Monica Johnson praised Woodard for her handling of the situation, especially given the fact that a strong contingent of experienced contributors to the last two state championship teams return, including eight starters.

“I just have to applaud [Woodard], because she has been working through this since the last championship game and, instead of continuing and leaving when maybe the program isn’t as strong as it is right now, she is working with the new coach from the start,” Johnson said in her recommendation to approve Woodard’s resignation and approve Osentoski’s new position. “She will be missed but, then again, she is still here and available for advice and direction, and that’s a pretty good luxury to have.”

Woodard reiterated that she has not left Strasburg and will stay engaged with all the district’s sports programs, including her favorite game.

“I’ll be on those (softball) sidelines watching quite a bit,” she said. “I’m confident there’s going to be a lot of success still for that program.”

In addition to Woodard, the Indians softball program also lost longtime pitching coach Lonnie Losh, who is stepping aside to take more time to watch his grandkids participate in the remainder of their school activities, mostly in northern Colorado.

Woodard and Losh both said they are assisting Osentoski in filling her set of assistant coaches.

In addition to the five state titles, Woodard concludes her 11 seasons with three Coach of the Year awards; four Lady Indians with Player of the Year awards; undefeated seasons in 2013 and 2015; playoff appearances each season; and a career record of 214-55.

In 3A softball history, Strasburg’s five gold balls in seven years is second only to Erie, which won 10 titles in 12 seasons (1998 through 2009) under coach Bob Bledsoe.
MICA H KO OLSTA
ARICKAREE/WOODLIN
The senior knocked in a half-court buzzer beater in the opening round of the District tournament helping the Indian Mustangs to a stunning win over Otis. Arickaree/Woodlin trailed 31-29 before the shot and the clock expired with the ball in the air. Koolstra finished with a game high 15 points in the win and leads the team in scoring (14.2), rebounding (7.1), assists (3.6) and steals (3.7) on the season.

CULLEN GLOSSON
OTIS
After averaging 21 points per game as a junior, injuries have limited Glosson to less than half the games for his senior campaign. But he has boosted the Bulldogs down the stretch. In his first ten games played, Glosson scored at least 20 points in eight of them and knocked in 26 three-pointers. In a first round district game with Idalia, Glosson netted a career high 44 points with 6 treys and hit all 12 FT’s.

ABBY SNYDER
ROCKY FORD
In two just two seasons, the sophomore has surpassed such levels as 500 points, 200 rebounds, 100 assists and 150 steals. More importantly, the Meloneers have won 14 games both seasons and this past week advanced to the Class 2A regional basketball tournament. Snyder is sixth in Class 2A in scoring (16.3) and also seventh in steals (4.5).

ANDREW BURTON
BURLINGTON
Burton was among the hottest scorers in any class at the close of the regular season. From January 29th through February 12th, Burton appeared in six games and topped at least 24 points in five of them. He also had 22 treys over the same six game stretch. In a win over Holyoke, Burton exploded for 30 points with seven three-pointers. He finished his junior campaign averaging just below 20 points per game.