

2012 OHSAA WRESTLING STATE TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

By Brian Brakeman



This is the 75th state wrestling tournament and during that time frame the sport has grown and prospered both in terms of participants and competition. The first tournament in 1938 consisted of 20 teams and about 120 participants, primarily from Cleveland, Akron and Columbus, and crowned 10 state champions from six high schools. No team scores were kept in an event hosted by the Greater Cleveland Coaches Association. City championships in some locales had been held since the 1920s, but this was the first recognized state-wide tournament. Since that time, 1,520 wrestlers have won at least one state title, with 316 having gained multiple championships. Overall, 55 high schools have won team championships, with Lakewood St. Edward's 26 titles the most by any school.

This year, over 300 high schools will be represented as action begins on Thursday featuring 672 of the finest wrestlers in Ohio. Almost in celebration, this 75th tournament features 25 former state champions, including a record 22 in Division I and II, and another 20 who were runners-up—again one of the largest sets of returning finalists in tournament history. It was anticipated that one of the highlights of this event would be Felipe Martinez's (Genoa) attempt to become Ohio's 23rd four-time champ. Unfortunately, a close family death prevented the brilliant Martinez from competing at the district level after winning a sectional title the weekend before. However, six other wrestlers—three seniors and three juniors—will be looking to capture their third state title. Meanwhile, in a record-setting and unprecedented performance, Lakewood St. Edward qualified their entire 14-man lineup at the Ashland District, virtually clinching their 27th team title. At the same time St. Paris Graham is a heavy favorite to capture their 12th consecutive Division II team title, but there is no consensus favorite in Division III, where a number of teams have title aspirations.

DIVISION I

In stark contrast to 2010 when only two underclassmen won state titles, 2011 witnessed a record 11 sophomores and juniors taking individual titles. Add to that total 10 others who are former state runners-up and there is a wealth of individual talent at virtually every weight class.

Two wrestlers will be contending for their third state title and both have crafted exceptional seasons. Dean Heil (Lakewood St. Edward), only a junior, has already won at 103# and 119#, and will be a solid favorite at 126#. He wrestled brilliantly at the famed Ironman Tournament, defeating three wrestlers ranked among the top five in the country in the same day, culminating in a fall over the #1 wrestler in the finals. He would become the 11th Lakewood St. Edward wrestler to win at least three state titles. Nick Tavanello, the exceptional senior big man from Wadsworth, is also trying for a third state title and has moved from the 215# class to heavyweight this year. That can sometimes be a perilous move, but Tavanello has only one early season loss this year and is primed to become the third Division I wrestler in history to win three state titles at 215# or above and would be joining Jim Dregalla (1954) and Matt Koz (2003). As a relatively small heavyweight, he faces serious challenges from among others, including the undefeated Pat Elflein (Pickerington North) and the powerful Luke Fleming (Olentangy Liberty) as he enters the competition with a lifetime record of 175-10.

It remains relatively rare to have a pair of returning state champions in the same weight class, but it happens twice this year in Division I. At 152#, seniors Chase DeLande (Hilliard Davidson) and Zach Dailey (Massillon Perry) compete after winning consecutive titles (140# and 145#) last year and will be favored to meet in the finals. DeLande missed much of season with injuries, while Dailey after beginning the year at 145# has moved up to this weight class. Dailey has lost twice this year and DeLande only once, but DeLande's loss was to Dailey at Delaware Hayes. At 182#, state champions Domenic Abounader (Lakewood St. Edward) and Michael Baker (Twinsburg) square off in one of the most anticipated matchups of the tournament. While Abounader cruised to the 160# title last year, Baker won at 171# with an exciting overtime decision over the favored Ian Korb. Both boys have had just one loss this year in what could be a premium matchup.

Two other state champions face difficult three-cornered weight classes with powerhouse opposition. At 132#, Joey Ward (Cin. Archbishop Moeller) must contend with state runner-up junior Edgar Bright (Lakewood St. Edward), who narrowly defeated him earlier in the year, and senior Kagan Squire (Wadsworth), who was second the last two years and third as a freshman. Ward upset Squire in last year's state finals, but must defeat both of these contenders to defend his title. Another three-way battle will be at 170# where state champion Mark Martin (Lakewood St. Edward) must contend with dynamic state placers Vince Pickett (Grove City Central Crossing) and undefeated Tommy Kimbrell (Kettering Fairmont). None of this trio has lost to an Ohio wrestler this year.

Perhaps, the best wrestler in Division I is the Cleveland St. Ignatius senior George DiCamillo at 120#. Undefeated the past two years, DiCamillo is ranked #1 in the country and has dominated virtually every bout this year. The one wrestler who kept it close (twice losing by a single point) was Ivan McClay (Massillon Washington), who remains a major threat at this weight class. Should DiCamillo win, he would become the 900th state champion at the Division I level. The only school beside Lakewood St. Edward with more than one returning state champion is a Solon team that features Brandon Thompson at 113# and Anthony Collica at 145#. Both face crowded weight classes, but remain favorites to repeat after impressive district title wins.

Lakewood St. Edward's sensational district performance – qualifying 14 wrestlers, including 10 district champions – all but won the state team title a week early. They have an opportunity to break the Division I scoring record, which they set in 2007 when they scored 229 points, but the loss of heavyweight state runner-up Greg Kuhar to injury was an unexpected setback. Also in sight is one of the oldest Division I records in the book—the six individual state titles won by Cleveland West in 1951. Ironically, Alex Moore, the 113# district champion for Lakewood St. Edward, is the grandson of Vince Matteucci, one of those six Cleveland West champions. The two teams likely to battle for the runner-up trophy are perennial powerhouses Massillon Perry, with seven qualifiers, and Moeller with eight, but Marysville, Oregon Clay, and Brecksville also bring powerful teams to Columbus.

DIVISION II

There is also very little suspense associated in the Division II team race. Mighty St. Paris Graham will be seeking its 12th consecutive state title and will be an overwhelming favorite to do so. Fueled by six potential finalists and two other qualifiers (all eight of whom won district titles) they will be a difficult team to defeat. Should they win, they will be only one title short of the all-time record of 13 consecutive titles held by Lakewood St. Edward (1997-2009). The battle for the runner-up trophy, however, is wide open with Cuyahoga Falls Walsh Jesuit (six qualifiers), Cuyahoga Valley Christian Academy (seven qualifiers) and Uhrichville Claymont and Steubenville (both with eight) the teams to watch.

As with Division I there is a near record number of returning state champions with 11 wrestlers looking for multiple titles. Four of this group will be aiming toward a third state title—a pair of exceptional seniors and two nationally top-ranked juniors—three of whom represent St. Paris Graham. Two of this group has a returning state champion in their bracket and all will face solid competition.

The often under-rated Ryan Taylor (St. Paris Graham) leads a powerful group of 120-pounders as he competes for his third state title. Only one of his state bouts the last two years has been reasonably close, and that was last year's final where he defeated three-time state placer Cory Stainbrook (Cuyahoga Falls Walsh Jesuit). Stainbrook returns at this weight class as does defending 103# state champion Mike Rix (Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary). And, if that is not enough, two-time state runner-up Calvin Campbell (Lexington) returns as well, after finishing behind Taylor at the district level. Of the six wrestlers in all three classifications seeking a third state title, Taylor faces the deepest field.

At 152# two-time state champion junior Bo Jordan (St. Paris Graham) is now ranked #1 in the nation and has fashioned a body of work that is putting him into the top tier of wrestlers all-time in Ohio. He had four falls in last year's state meet and now sports a career record of 129-1. Still, he faces a returning state champion in his bracket, the outstanding senior Kyle Burns (Milan Edison) who gained a dramatic last-second state title last year.

Also striving for a third state title are the #1 nationally ranked Nathan Tomasello (Cuyahoga Valley Christian Academy) and the highly ranked Isaac Jordan (St. Paris Graham). Both are solid favorites to repeat with Tomasello (113#) undefeated the past two seasons and Jordan (160#) looking to complete a perfect year. Currently, the Jordan family, fathers and sons, have won 16 state titles and are favored in three weight classes this year.

Perhaps, the most anticipated bout in Division II, however, matches Chaz Gresham (Goshen), last year's state champion, with the wrestler whose title he took, former state champion Huston Evans (St. Paris Graham). Last year Gresham bounced back from a district loss to Evans to win the title at 189#. This year at 182# they very likely will again meet in the finals in what will be a battle of titans. Both are three-time state placers with tremendous in-season credentials.

Other returning state champions are Nate Skonieczny (Cuyahoga Falls Walsh Jesuit) at 138#, sophomore sensation Micah Jordan (St. Paris Graham) wrestling at 126#, and the brilliant heavyweight Riley Shaw (Washington Courthouse). Skonieczny, who placed second and third his first two years, won a heart-stopping battle with Case Garrison, out this year with an injury, in overtime. He has been ranked as high as #1 nationally in some polls. Jordan, the only Division II freshman

champion last year, rebounded from an early 4-0 deficit to take the title. Shaw moved up to 285# at the end of last year in a strategic move that worked out perfectly and has met very little resistance this season to this point in time.

DIVISION III

It was a senior-laden state tournament in Division III last year as only two defending titleholders return this year to defend their championships. One of these is the powerful heavyweight Mimmo Lytle (Swanton) who has lost only once the past two years. Lytle would become a rare four-time state placer in the heavyweight division and has become a pinning machine with seven falls the last two years in state competition. He faces tough competition, especially from long-time rival Justin Gillen (Liberty Center), who keeps getting closer each time they meet with Lytle beating him by a single point each of the past three weekends.

The only freshman champion in Division III last year was the excellent youth wrestler Jacob Danishek (Dayton Christian) at 112#. He has moved up three weight classes this year and faces stern competition at 132#, particularly returning state runner-up Jacob Border (Caldwell), who has fashioned an unbeaten season. After an unexpected district loss by Danishek, this duo is expected to meet in the quarterfinals with state placer Zach Niner (Liberty Center) likely meeting the winner in the next round.

Two other weight classes feature a pair of outstanding wrestlers, neither of whom has yet won a state title. At 182# state runner-up junior B. J. Toal (Troy Christian) fell last year to four-time champion Chris Phillips, and has lost but once this season to Huston Evans while finishing third at the Ironman. He'll likely face-off with the powerful junior Kevin Stock (Garrettsville Garfield), who he defeated in last year's state semifinal, 8-7. Expect renewed fireworks this year. At 220# a pair of seniors who had injury issues last year should create some real excitement. Returning state runner-up Kennedy Smith (St. Peter Chanel) suffered a serious injury in last year's state final and is finally healthy after a 10 month rehabilitation. Opposite him will be the undefeated Curtis Miller (Delphos Jefferson), who qualified for the state meet last year, but was unable to wrestle because of injury. He has produced an enviable pin percentage the past two years. Right behind this duo are two stalwarts from the Northwest District—state placers Kyle Bellamy (Sandusky St. Mary) and Jacob Baker (Bloomdale Elmwood).

One of the deepest weight classes in the entire tournament will occur at 120#. Included in the field are six former state placers among whom are a pair of state runners-up—Cody Steiner (Waynesville) and undefeated Cade Mansfield (Ayersville)—state third-place finisher Austin Reese (Mechanicsburg), state fourth-place finisher Casey Johns (Middlefield Cardinal) and Zach Nelson (Apple Creek Waynedale). Anticipate exciting bouts from the very first round at this weight class.

Since 2000, all of the close and exciting team races (with the exception of the glorious 2010 Division I battle) have occurred in Division III. Six times during that time frame there have been riveting battles for the coveted team trophy. This year should maintain that tradition in a highly fragmented situation with school reclassification moving two of last year's top teams into Division II. This year there may be as many as a half-dozen teams with realistic championship aspirations. Most years the champion in Division III scores at least 100 points and, oftentimes, somewhat more. This year it is very likely that far less may be enough to win. Apple Creek Waynedale remains a slender favorite with the Nelson twins (120# and 138#), Stanley cousins (145# and 152#), and the powerful Zeb Beam (160#) their best opportunities for state scoring among their six qualifiers. Beachwood, which finished second in 2003, has a strong quartet in sophomore state placers Sammy Gross (113#) and Ryan Harris (138#) backed up by senior stars Grant Blumenthal (152#) and David Shapiro (160#). Troy Christian, winner of three titles between 2007 and 2009, features the exceptional juniors Jordan Marshall (145#) and B. J. Toal (182) with possible backup help from the exciting freshmen Jarred Ganger (106#) and Garrett Hancock (113#). Other contenders include Delta (four qualifiers) and Nelsonville-York (five qualifiers).

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