

Burlington gymnastics sweep top-two spots at state

Benavides takes gold, Fitzpatrick silver

By David Michels
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MADISON — Molly Benavides and Bailey Fitzpatrick were overwhelmed by the end of the state meet on Friday.

The irony is that the Burlington gymnasts overwhelmed the rest of the competition at the division 1 individual meet, bringing home a combined eight medals, including both first and second place for the all-around best gymnasts.

Benavides took the gold in the all-around with a score of 38.3 and Fitzpatrick took silver at 37.85, effectively dominating the field of

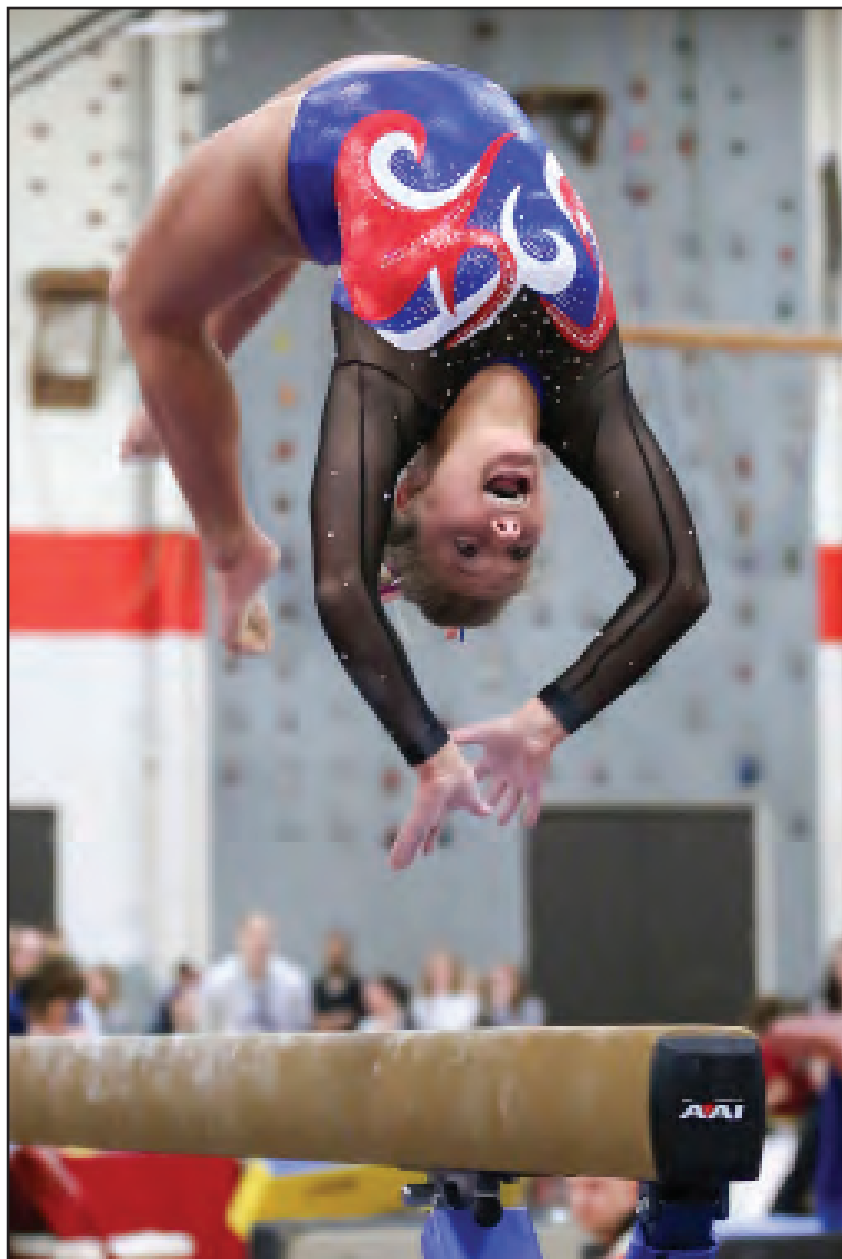
competitors as the pair added to their already extensive collection of state medals.

Both girls have 13 medals at home in the trophy case, each with six gold.

"I don't know if I'll ever see that level in a couple of girls in one program going through at the same time (again)," Burlington coach Diane Biedrzycki said in a phone interview after the tournament.

And despite reaching the pinnacle of high school gymnastics on Friday, neither girl thought that they competed to their highest potential.

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SUBMITTED BY RICK BENAVIDES

BURLINGTON GYMNAST MOLLY BENAVIDES performs her routine on the balance beam. She finished first with a score of 9.633, but couldn't medal because she didn't qualify for state in that event.

Chiefs' road rally upsets Cougars

By David Michels
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The Chiefs (5-19) had one final hurrah before putting a trying 2015 season to bed.

Big Foot boys basketball coach Michael Dowden has said all season that he sees the potential his team has to compete, they just have to find a way to pull it together and form a cohesive unit on the floor.

On Tuesday, March 3, the Chiefs finally did just that in the most unlikely of places as they traveled to Clinton for the opening round of their regional tournament.

The Cougars ended the regular season a game behind first-place Beloit Turner in the Rock Valley-South conference, finishing the year with an 11-5 record. The Chiefs



Tovar

closed out the season tied for fourth with a RVS record of 3-13.

Firmly entrenched in the underdog role, that made Big Foot's stunning 44-42 overtime road

victory over the Cougars all the more shocking.

"I was really happy with the way that we played our defense and got pretty good shots," Dowden said, noting that the Chiefs still struggled to shoot the ball from outside despite their open looks.

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DAVID MICHELS/REGIONAL NEWS

BULLDOGS FORWARD JOHN HIGGINS throws down a slam dunk during Williams Bay's win over Black Hawk in the regional championship Saturday.

Bulldogs lead the pack, crowned regional champs

Senior John Higgins eclipses 1,000 career points

By David Michels
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WILLIAMS BAY — The arena was fraught with strained silence as Williams Bay point guard Cory Shea stepped to the foul line during Saturday's regional final against the Black Hawk Warriors.

But by the time he stepped away, the stands were rumbling with vivacious applause.

A once ample Bulldogs lead had been trimmed to just one and momentum was slowly shifting back to the Warriors, but with a pair of makes from the free throw line with just 13.2 seconds left to play, Shea had done his part.

The pair of penalty points boosted the Williams Bay advantage to 56-53, and when the Black Hawk player attempting to tie the game stepped out of bounds on the ensuing possession, the game, and the regional championship, was all but decided.

Following a one-for-two trip to the line by Bulldogs forward Brayden Pape after being intentionally fouled, the final score rested at 57-53 and the Williams Bay student section, bedecked in red, white and blue, flooded the court.

After cutting down the nets

in the gym, Shea said that the game was amazing, especially considering he struggled with his foul shots earlier at the Bulldogs' morning shoot-around. To make sure it didn't carry over to the game, Shea said he went to the Four Lakes Athletic Club to get some extra practice in the afternoon.

"I went to FLAC earlier in the day and we were messing around, talking about how I need to sink free throws to win the regional finals," he said.

The seemingly prophetic Williams Bay players spent their time wisely as they prepped for the game's final moments.

"I just talked myself through it," Shea said about his mindset after he got fouled. "We're going through this and we're going

to win. We're not going to lose tonight."

The opener

Before the Bulldogs booked their ticket to sectionals, they had to survive the preliminary rounds of regionals; their first matchup, the visiting Monticello Ponies, whom they dismantled 70-38 on Tuesday night, March 3.

The Bulldogs broke out to an early 15-4 lead as the Ponies struggled mightily in the opening frame, and Monticello never recovered.

They were more competitive in the second quarter, even drawing within six points before Williams Bay asserted itself once again, procuring a 29-15 halftime lead.

Monticello's Ben May scored 28 of the Ponies' 37 points, but gained little assistance from the rest of his team.

Conversely, the Bulldogs score was buoyed by its bench as 11 Williams Bay players scored in the win.

John Higgins led the charge with a team-high 22 points and Brayden Pape followed with 13 as the Bulldogs eviscerated the Ponies 41-23 in the second half.

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Shea



Pape

SPORTS

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Badger/The Badgers rallied back in the fourth

At halftime Verona led just 33-29, but by the midpoint of the third quarter the Wildcats' lead had grown as large as 15 points. The home team repeatedly abused the Badger defenders on the glass as they netted a wealth of offensive rebounds.

"We were not very good at boxing out and they really hurt us," Larson said. "They really got into a rhythm running their offense and that was an issue. Defensively, what we were trying to do in terms of switching screens was pretty solid. We had a good week of practice getting ready for these guys defensively, but it came down to we didn't box out."

The Badger's didn't do a good enough job pressuring the ball, either, Larson said, allowing the Wildcats offense to romp for most of the game.

Verona's Will Kellerman led the onslaught, ripping through the paint and getting to the basket for 21 points. But despite Kellerman's slashing attack, the Badgers' resolve never wavered.

After being skewered in the early going of the third, the Badgers rallied. They came roaring back in the third quarter to be outscored just 26-21, and continued their assault deep into the fourth frame.

Badger's success stemmed from exploding on the break and



Freeman



Berhorst

finishing in transition, connecting both up close and from deep.

Joe Freeman's team-high 18 points paced the Badger offense that saw four players reach double figures, among whom was the sharp-shooting Bryant Sontag. Sontag bombarded Verona from behind the arc with a cavalcade of 3s en route to 17 points.

"Bryant Sontag and Joe Freeman both had great games," Larson said. "Those two guys, for the last high school game of their careers, were simply outstanding."

Mason DuMez also logged a pair of timely 3s, ensuring the game never broke too wide open. DuMez finished the game with 6 points.

Larson said that the Badger players' ability to maintain their composure and continue running their offense under pressure was

integral in their come back.

"We forced some turnovers in the fourth quarter, we made some 3s and we got right back into the game," he said.

The Badger defense finally began to tighten the screws in the fourth and disrupt the Verona offense, while the marquee tandem of guards Lincoln Wieseman and Jake Berhorst found their traction and showcased what made them the most dangerous offensive duo in the SLC this season.

Wieseman notched 14 points for the game and Berhorst added 12, fueling the Badgers as they continued to gain ground in the game's final stanza, outscoring the Wildcats 19-13.

It proved too little, too late, however, as the Badgers fell woefully short in the final moments, ultimately losing by just three points.

Though the loss prematurely ended Badger's postseason, it didn't put a damper on the team's accomplishments in the eyes of their coach.

"I thought being down 15 in the third quarter and then coming back and having a chance to take the lead with about 10 seconds left, they were outstanding," Larson said of his team's unrelenting effort. "There was no quit, they did a great job coming back."

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Strike/Real team effort

"Most of these kids started bowling here when they were young children, and now they're up and coming young gentlemen," Guske said. "They're all dedicated bowlers. They're all pretty qualified, they truly are, and yet they have a lot to learn."

Guske routinely attends the Badger practices to monitor their improvement and he says that he's grown very invested in the team and hopes one day to have a trophy to hang in the front entrance of the bowling alley.

With the team traveling to state, Guske said that the Lake Geneva Lanes wanted to do something else for the kids to show its support.

"We're going to pick up their hotel rooms and some of their expenses," he said. "It's not that they can't afford it, it's our way of saying thank you."

The big dance

Stereotypical bowling alleys are known to be relaxing, quiet and dark, making it easy for bowlers to maintain their concentration throughout a match.

The state meet, however, is a different beast entirely.

Fortunately for the Badgers, some of their older team members have experience with the ceaseless fervor of the crowds and were able to share those memories with

their teammates.

"My freshman year we went to state," Crisman said. "At least when we went, there were always ridiculous parents and friends that are just really loud and annoying. You just can't let it get to you."

To prepare for the distractions, the team practiced with cowbells ringing and air horns blaring the week leading up to state, despite the protests of the Badger coach.

"Coach doesn't like it very much," Crisman said, laughing. "He's got hearing aids, so it bothers him, but yeah, we try."

At the meet, the Badgers finished 18th out of the 24 teams competing in the division 1 tournament, scoring 2,833 pins after 15 games.

Storms said that all seven of his bowlers improved "tremendously" throughout the season, and that he was extremely proud of their effort to unify as a team.

No individual bowler was chosen to represent the Badgers at the individual state tournament, but their ability to band together and qualify for the team tournament is a testament to their grit and determination.

"We beat the snot out of all the good teams," Storms said about their road to state. "We did, they just stepped up and refused to lose."

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Chiefs/Stifling defense

"That wasn't anything new for us, but I thought that we executed, we got some good looks inside and when we needed to, we got some stops."

The Chiefs pulled out to an early 15-9 lead in the first quarter, but struggled to score in the second as they totalled just three baskets.

By halftime they led 21-19, but Clinton battled back in the fourth quarter to take a five-point lead.

Trailing 39-34 with 3:45 left to play in regulation, the Chiefs dug their heels in and put forth another grinding defensive effort that fed into their offense.

Big Foot outscored the Cougars 6-1 in the final three minutes to send the game to extra time.

In the overtime period the Chiefs defense played possessed in an effort to make up for their lack of scoring. The Walworth squad tallied just four points in the final four minutes, but still managed to double the output they allowed Clinton.

"The people that were there got to see our guys really have some good, pure emotion there and that was pretty new for us," Dowden said. "We struggled with playing together and doing some things like that. It was definitely a good win for us as this time of the season."

Dowden also added that allowing just three points in the final eight minutes of the game didn't hurt either, saying "you've got to be happy about that."

Beau Cary was bullish in the post, notching a game-high 14 points. Forward Chandler Hehr poured in 11.

Six Chiefs players found their way into the scoring column on Tuesday, but the box score wasn't indicative of the team's performance according to the Big Foot coach.

"To be honest with you, it was a really good team effort more than anything," Dowden said. "We only put up 44, so when you think about it, that's only 44 in 36 minutes, so it's not like we were writing any letters home about how well we were scoring. But we got a really good team game, and I would say that was probably our best team game for the season."

At Evansville

Following the upset over Clinton, Big Foot made the trek out to Evansville on Friday night to face

the Blue Devils.

For the Chiefs, the playoffs would finish in Evansville as they were hammered 61-52 in the second round matchup.

The Chiefs seemed to follow the same first half formula used against Clinton, narrowly edging Evansville 12-10 in the first quarter before having their offense stall in the second.

Scoring just four points in the final eight minutes of the first half, Big Foot found itself trailing 22-16 at the break.

One of Big Foot's defensive philosophies against Evansville was to force the Blue Devils into contested perimeter shots, Dowden said.

The Chiefs did that for the most part, holding their hosts to just 3 of 17 shooting from behind the arc, but a pair of 3s in the third quarter took Big Foot out of the game.

"One was off an offensive rebound and the other was off a bank-in, and those two kind of broke our back," Dowden said.

The Blue Devils offense surged as they logged 20 points in the third, improving their lead to 14.

"Again, we didn't shoot the ball well, but when push came to shove, we got the ball inside," Dowden said.

The Big Foot coach noted that he thought big man Nico Tovar played one of the best halves he'd played all season against Evansville as the Chiefs attempted to rally. Tovar's 18 points fueled the Chiefs' final quarter offense as they outmatched the Blue Devils 24-19.

"It's just too bad," Dowden said. "We kind of challenged him a little there at halftime and I thought he stepped up to the challenge and we hit a couple shots."

Guard Alex Landers followed with 10 points and Will Huerth knocked down a pair of 3s throughout the course of the game.

"We had a chance," Dowden said. "We just couldn't get over the hump. It was close for a while, then they went on a run."

Regardless of the loss, the final two games of the season indicated to Dowden that the Chiefs were on the right path to being competitive night in and night out.

"It took almost all season, but finally those last two tournament games together, they played the way that I thought they were capable of playing all year long," he said.

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Champs/'A lot of people were writing us off'**Semifinals**

The Bulldogs didn't find such a frail opponent in the second round as they endured a slugfest with the Albany Comets on Friday night, eventually pulling out the 65-58 victory.

"We knew they were coming in here with some talent and we gutted it out," Williams Bay coach Troy Nottestad said after the game.

Nottestad said that he kept expecting the Bulldogs to pull away periodically throughout the second half, but the Comets continued to cycle back within striking distance until the very end.

"They hit some big shots," he said. "They got a few 3-pointers and got to the basket on us a few times. To our kids' credit, we just kept battling, battling and wore them down in the end."

After opening a three-point 18-15 lead in the first period, the Bulldogs were deadlocked with the Comets for the rest of the half. In the third they were able to build a 13-12 advantage, buffering the Bay's lead to 44-40, but the Bulldogs proved unable of putting the game away.

Nottestad said that one of the reasons they were unable to shake Albany was due to the sticky fingers of the Comets' #14, Tyler Dahl.

"We haven't seen a kid like him all year," Nottestad said. "Because he's just quick, he's on the ball at all times. You put the ball anywhere loose around him, he's taking it from you and he took it from us a few times, but we did just enough to get by."

Williams Bay was able to offset the turnovers forced by Dahl by utilizing the height of its players and controlling the boards. Avery Lettenberger and Brad Quinn cleaned the glass while Higgins continued to score from the post, fighting through double- and triple-teams as he logged a game-high 16 points.

Shea added 13 while manning the point.

Grant Germano finished the game with just seven, but his efforts were hardly expressed by the stat sheet.

"(Germano's) most of the time one of our shooting expertise guys, and tonight he went in and he took two charges," Nottestad said. "He had some rebounds and he did hit a 3. I thought his energy was one of the reasons we pulled



Germano



Quinn

it out in the end."

The championship

"We'll give them hell here at home."

That was Nottestad's sentiment after defeating Albany the day before, quickly adding that he thought the top-seeded Bulldogs were a tough out for anybody on their home floor.

It was no picnic for the Bulldogs either, however, as Black Hawk put together a 6-0 run to start the game, putting Williams Bay in the hole early.

The ebb and flow of the first half shifted back and forth evenly as the Warriors built a 12-9 lead after the first quarter, only to watch it wash away after being outscored 13-10 in the second period.

After halftime the Bulldogs re-emphasized running their offense through Higgins as he navigated around the defense down low, routinely slipping past one defender and elevating over the rest.

Higgins closed the game with 19 points, and when asked about his thought process on offense, he said simply "Do work."

Sophomore Brayden Pape poured in 10 points of his own as the Bulldogs built an eight-point lead after a 19-11 third quarter.

The Warriors wouldn't go quietly into the night, however, as they enjoyed a resurgent 20 point fourth.

"I thought we outplayed them most of the game and you just don't want it to happen," Nottestad said of his anxiety during the Warriors' attempted comeback bid. "We didn't make it pretty all the time, but we made enough plays to get a championship."

Prior to Shea's title-clinching trip to the line, the Bulldogs lead was trimmed to just three. It was bolstered emphatically, however, as Higgins threw down a rim-rocking slam dunk on the fast break that elicited a timeout from

Black Hawk and a victory lap from a Williams Bay student lifting an American flag.

After the game, Nottestad said that he went back into the locker room to tell the team how proud of them he was.

"I think in the middle of the year a lot of people were kind of writing us off, and we did have some struggles in the middle of the year," he said. "We started talking a month ago or so about, we were kind of out of the conference race, so we started talking about a regional championship."

Nottestad said that his team's success stemmed not from the skill or the innate talent of his players, but from the heart with which they play the game.

"I think it was everybody we put in there. It was about playing hard. If we didn't play as hard as we did, I don't think we pull this one out. Because we made some mistakes, we didn't shoot great. But the effort that we put forth was able to carry us to victory tonight."

Higgins' milestone

During the championship game on Saturday night, Higgins' scoring didn't just lead the team. He logged the 1,000th point of his high school career en route to securing Williams Bay's first regional championship in 13 years.

"I'm just so thankful," Higgins said after the game. "I couldn't have done it without my teammates and everything."

Higgins has been setting milestones in numerous sports during his senior year, also breaking the state record for most tackles in a high school varsity football career as well.

Nottestad said that he simply gave Higgins a hug in the locker room after the game, adding that while it's a great achievement, it's not something Higgins cares about.

"He's more about the team, but it is a great honor," Nottestad said. "That he, through the four years, was able to score 1,000 points; that's staying healthy, that's staying consistent, that's working hard, and I couldn't be prouder of him. But like I said, he's not that kind of guy that's worried about that, he was worried about helping his teammates and bringing home a championship for the school."