Four state champions!

AHS’ Smith, UCA’s Waddell and Martin, WHS’ Oakley win titles

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GREENSBORO — Thousands of wrestlers began the season months ago with the ultimate goal of finishing it as a state champion in February.

Saturday, four wrestlers from Randolph County achieved that ultimate goal.

Asheboro’s Michael Smith, Wheatmore’s Ethan Oakley and Uwharrie Charter Academy’s Isaiah Martin and Hayden Waddell each won individual state titles at the NCHSAA State Championships at the Greensboro Coliseum.

UCA also capped the event off by winning the team portion of the competition and Eagles wrestler Heaven Fitch became the first female wrestler to place in tournament history.

Smith won the 3-A state championship in the 220-pound classification by a 3-2 overtime decision over Ray Dixon from Douglas Byrd.

“When it started, he was wrestling dirty, and then they called a stalling,” Smith said. “But I just kept pushing the pace and I knew I just had to wrestle.”

Smith (50-2) won his second state title, going back-to-back after winning last year, to claim AHS’ sixth state championship in the last five years.

“It was more nerve-racking than last time, and it showed that I’ve still got what it takes,” said Smith, a Belmont Abbey signee. “The coaches kept pushing me every week — I wouldn’t have made it back here without them.”

“The kid’s got a lot of perseverance and he just doesn’t like to lose,” AHS coach Wes Berrier said. “It’s tough to come in here and win back-to-back. To do it is just remarkable and there’s only a small class of kids in North Carolina that have done it — it’s an elite group of wrestlers.”

Smith fell behind twice in the match, 1-0 and 2-1, before rallying to tie the match at 2-2 in the third set and win it with 43 seconds left in the overtime round.

At the 2-A level, Oakley won the state championship at 126 pounds. Oakley won by decision, but was dominant in his match against Cayman Carpenter from Bunker Hill, with four points in the first round and five each in the second and third to win 14-0. Oakley becomes a back-to-back state champion.

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A HAT TRICK — UCA’s Hayden Waddell captured his third state championship Saturday.
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two-time state champion after winning in 2017 as a freshman; he lost in the state final last year.

“I knew it was going to be tough,” Oakley said. “My mindset changed coming back from a loss last year in the finals. I got my mindset back where it needed to be.”

“If any kid deserves it, it’s him,” WHS coach Philip Yarbrough said. “He’s the consummate teammate and puts everyone else in front of himself. So to see him achieve his ultimate goal is fulfilling for all of us.”

He joins his brother as a two-time state champion.

“He came down in the warmup area and gave me some motivation,” Oakley said. “He also took a loss his sophomore year and he always gives me tips and helps me.”

Martin won the 1-A state championship at 182 by pinning Voyager’s Wesley Sharpe in 46 seconds.

“It means a lot and it feels good,” Martin said.

“I’ve worked hard for this. I couldn’t have done it without Coach (Chris) Waddell.”

Martin finishes the season at a perfect 59-0 after pinning every opponent in the first round.

“It’s incredible what he’s done,” Waddell said.

Hayden Waddell, also from UCA, won a 1-A state championship at 120 pounds, winning the state title for the third straight year by defeating Dylan Lowery from Mitchell.

“That’s as nervous as I’ve been,” Hayden Waddell said.

The third time being here and I was putting everything on the line, so it was a lot to think about. I worked so hard and all that effort pays off.”

Winning three championships and finishing an undefeated season at 61-0 was the culmination of a lifetime goal for Hayden, the son of UCA coach Chris Waddell.

“It’s been a goal since I was little,” Hayden Waddell said. “It’s a lot of pressure, but now it’s a relief.”

“I wish I had 100 like him,” Chris Waddell said. “The drive, the work ethic and his mindset — and he’s very humble and doesn’t flaunt what he does.”

UCA also made history with one of their other wrestlers as Heaven Fitch (54-9) finished fourth at 106, becoming the first female to place in state tournament history.

“It means a lot to show progression for girls wrestling,” Fitch said. “I’m just another wrestler — I’m not something to be taken for granted. This is what I wanted, just to place, and I did.”

She won her first match of the day Saturday by a medical forfeit, then pinned her next opponent before losing the third-place match by majority decision. She was 2-2 in the tournament.

“She’s one of the toughest kids around,” Chris Waddell said. “I don’t think of her as a female wrestler — I think of her as a wrestler.”

The two undefeated state championships and Fitch helped lead the Eagles to the event’s team championship, adding to the 1-A state dual team championship the team won two weeks ago. UCA had 99.5 points, runner-up Robinsville had 97.5 and third-place Rosewood had 96.5.

“Two undefeated wrestlers and state champions, undefeated as a team, dual team state champions and the first girl to place at state — it’s a perfect storm and we’ll never have another season like this one,” Chris Waddell said.

The UCA coach was one of two coaches named 1-A state coach of the year.

“That’s cool, and it’s great to get individual awards, but for the team to do stuff is more meaningful for me,” Chris Waddell said. “I always told them I live through them and what they accomplish.”

In addition to the four finalists and Fitch, four additional Randolph wrestlers placed in the tournament, including three from UCA.

Josh Poteat (34-6) from UCA finished third at 113, recovering from a first-round loss on Friday to win three matches on Saturday. He won matches Saturday by pin, sudden-victory decision and decision, finishing 3-1 in the event.

Jerry Jimenez (52-17) from UCA finished third at 152. Jimenez pinned both his Saturday opponents to finish 3-1. Caleb Bryant (55-12) from UCA also finished third at 145. He won a consolation match by majority decision and pinned his opponent in the third-place match to go 3-1 for the week.

Trinity’s Aaron Ortega-Perez (42-16) placed sixth at 113, though he lost his two matches on Saturday, both by decision, to finish the tournament 2-3.

Six other area wrestlers were still alive in the tournament’s consolation rounds entering Saturday. UCA’s Shane Cuda (40-15) won a match by pin at 132, but lost his next match by majority decision to finish the tournament at 1-2.

Jame Bernal (34-13) from UCA won his first match of the day at 195 by decision, but lost by pin to end his tournament at 1-2.

Asheboro’s Sam Voncannon (53-7) lost by decision and was eliminated at 170, finishing the tournament 2-2.

At 106, Trinity’s David Makupson (44-15) was eliminated when he was pinned in his only match Saturday, going 2-2 for the tournament.

Steven Trim (32-12) from Randleman was pinned and eliminated at 285, finishing the tournament 2-2.

UCA’s Jimmy Blake (43-20) lost by 8-4 decision in his consolation match at 126, ending the event at 0-2.

Sergio Suldana (45-14), also from UCA, lost his lone match on Saturday to bow out of the tournament at 0-2.

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