

McCollum rewarded for his effort

BY CHRIS BAHN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

BENTONVILLE — There are about 200 people Blake McCollum would like to thank now that he's won an individual and team wrestling state championship.

McCollum doesn't remember all the names off the top of his head, but the senior credits each one of them for giving him an opportunity to win Saturday's 160-pound weight class title. Every student who signed a petition last year to bring wrestling to Bentonville as a club sport means something to McCollum.

"To think where we were last year, trying to find people to support us, this feels great," McCollum said. "I'd like to thank them for showing interest. They helped make this possible."

McCollum's efforts paid off Saturday as he and the Tigers captured championships. Bentonville easily won the team title, claiming seven first-place medals in a sport enthusiasts are hoping takes hold as a sanctioned high school event in Arkansas.

No team had as many first or second-place finishers as the Tigers, who scored 298.5 points. Fayetteville posted 193.5 points in a 16-team competition that was decided long before the conclusion of Saturday's meet.

"I think we had it won before the finals, but it was good they came out hard and went after it," Coach Bill Dessler said. "When you've got kids that compete like I do, they are all champions to me."

McCollum was among those to draw Dessler's praise, though his individual victory didn't come as easily as the team's. McCollum rallied for a 10-9 victory against Springdale's Tyler Edwards.

"We've had some great matches this season," McCollum said. "He's a heck of a wrestler. I knew he was going to be tough. I had a pretty good feeling about it, but I was nervous."

"I felt like I had to win. There was no other option. My family was there. My teammates were there. I wanted to win."

It was at least the sixth time McCollum and Edwards had met this year, and their familiarity with each other showed as the two turned in one of the meet's most competitive matches. Edwards led early, taking a 6-2 points advantage before McCollum fought back, winning the final point on an escape move.

"Sometimes I think they wait until the end because they want to give their coach a heart attack," Dessler said. "Blake has done that before. He'll be behind, come back and win."

McCollum's victory illustrated two of his biggest strengths. He showcased his quickness and intelligence in reversing a hold to win the final point. Dessler said it was pure ingenuity that allowed McCollum to prevail.

"He was smart," Dessler said. "He was a smart wrestler. He made good decisions."

McCollum was among the competitors who had a background in wrestling. He picked up the sport while living in Japan, where his father was serving in the military.

Though he wrestled only two years between the eighth and 10th grades, it provided McCollum a good base. McCollum, who has been accepted to the Naval Academy and Coast Guard Academy, moved with his family to Bentonville last year. Upon discovering there was no wrestling team at the school, he took part in a movement to get the sport instituted as a club activity.

McCollum's determination was impressive to Dessler, who formerly coached in Nebraska.

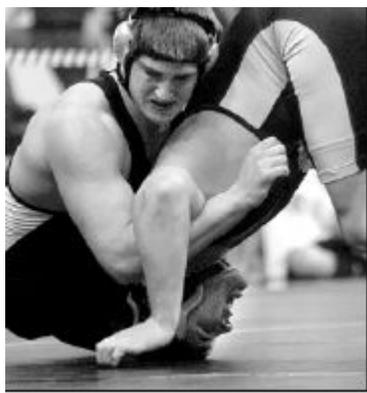
"He helped get this going, came out last year and worked harder than anybody," Dessler said. "He really kept it going."

"Blake is one of those kids, he's got such a good heart. He won and it means a lot not just to him, but everybody on the team."

Knowing the efforts needed to make wrestling a reality at Bentonville made the victory even sweeter for McCollum.

"This feels great," McCollum said. "I'm a state champ. Our team is state champs. This is a great way to end my career."





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Bentonville's Nick Stewart (left) tries to put a move on Tyler Lawrence of Pulaski Academy during the finals of the 215-pound weight division at the Arkansas State Wrestling Championships in Bentonville.