

By Joe Henderson

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Having accomplished more than most wrestlers in his first three years with the Cranberry High School program, Dalton Wenner took things to another level during his senior season.

The 139-pounder not only became the Berries' all-time leader in wins and the first in Cranberry history to reach 150 victories, he claimed that elusive state title after a run of two sevenths and a sixth his first three years.

"It's definitely been a great year, a fun year. It's my last year with my teammates and my friends, so it's just been great," Wenner said. "I loved getting the win record. That was always a goal of mine since I was little, so I'm just glad to see that come true and be able to get that."

Not too bad for a kid who was beaten soundly in his first taste of competitive wrestling when he was 6 years old.

"I've thought about how far I've come since I was little, especially considering I got beat by a girl in my very first match," Wenner said. "It's nice to be able to look back and see how much growth I've made in the sport."

Wenner — who completed his scholastic career with a 161-25 record, including a 46-5 mark this past year — was looking for a better finish at the state meet after those first

three ventures to the state tournament. (He wrestled at 107 pounds as a freshman and was also listed at 145 this year.)

He got it with a nearly flawless performance in his four bouts.

“To be honest, I feel like I wrestled pretty well at Hershey. It (the title bout) was definitely one of my better wins as a wrestler,” Wenner said. “If I wasn’t at my best, I feel like the outcome of the whole tournament would have been different. Luckily, I was at my best and I was able to wrestle well the whole weekend and just stay focused.”

He set the tone in his first match in Hershey, rolling to an 11-1 major decision over Kiovanny Hamlin of Allentown Dieruff. He continued his run with a 14-1 major decision over Isaiah Jackson of Gettysburg in the quarterfinals.

In the semifinals, Wenner recorded a 6-3 decision over Reef Dillard of Bethlehem Catholic before finishing off his gold-medal run with a 3-1 three-overtime decision over Cedar Cliff’s Aiden Herndon, a three-time state medalist.

“It feels great. I waited like four years to do it, so I’m glad it finally came,” Wenner said of claiming that elusive gold medal. “At first, it didn’t sink in, but after about a week, I kind of realized what I accomplished and it’s kind of nice.”

The win over Herndon was especially gratifying considering that Wenner lost to him three times previously this past season.

“It was definitely a win I wanted to get back, especially after losing to him two times on the mat and another with an injury default,” Wenner said. “It was definitely a win I wanted to get in a rematch I wanted to get.”

Wenner worked to change his game plan for the Herndon rematch with his coach, Dustin Wenner, who is also his father.

“We looked at the video from the previous matches and we kind of had a game plan going into the match of what we wanted to do, but we had to execute it,” Dalton Wenner said. “I thought the game plan definitely worked as he (Herndon) wasn’t able to score. I wasn’t able to score with him much either, but it kept him off of my legs for the most part. The bout ended up going to an ultimate ride out and we were able to win in the end.”

After coming away with a medal, but not the gold, in his three previous trips to the state tournament, Wenner feels his improved mental game made all the difference this year.

“I would say I was tougher mentally this year compared to the past three years. In the past, if I was behind in a match, most likely I wasn’t coming back. This year, I changed my mindset a bit, and if I got behind in a match, I knew I could still come back. It’s just wrestling. I just have to keep scoring points,” Dalton said. “I think my mindset is where I’ve grown the most, and I really feel like it really affected my wrestling and really helped me out a lot.”

In a grueling sport like wrestling, injuries are a common part of the sport, and Dalton suffered his share during his career. But his health this year played a big factor in his postseason success.

“This was definitely the healthiest I’ve been at the end of a season,” Dalton said. “After years of having pretty poor luck of being healthy, this year I felt great going into the state tournament, so it was a real bonus for me.”

With such a decorated career at Cranberry now behind him, Dalton is looking forward to the next phase of his career, competing at the next level at PennWest Clarion University in the fall.

“I chose Clarion because it was close to home, I love the coaches and I feel like it’s a good fit for my style,” he said. “I can do what I want here. I can hunt and fish and stuff like that, and my family doesn’t have to travel far to come and watch me wrestle.

“There’s a lot of goals and expectations for me, and I’d like to do well on the national scene, but we’ll see what happens and what’s to come,” Dalton added.

But Dalton has another challenging bout left before heading off to college as he will be competing at the Pittsburgh Wrestling Classic, which pits the Pennsylvania All-Stars vs. the United States All-Stars, on Saturday, March 28, at Peters Township High School’s AHN Arena.

Wenner will face either Moses Mendoza of Gilroy California or Tyler Dekraker of Orlando, Florida, at the event. Mendoza is the No. 1 ranked wrestler in the country at 138 pounds while Dekraker is the No. 3 ranked wrestler nationally at 144 pounds.

Either wrestler poses a significant challenge, but Wenner already faced Dekraker at the Powerade tournament in late December, losing by fall in 4:17.

“In two weeks, I’m wrestling in the Pittsburgh Wrestling Classic, so that will be a cool experience and a chance to see how I stack up nationally,” he said. “I’ve actually wrestled the kid from Florida this year, so hopefully it will be a different outcome.”