Five Lights headed to NAIA nationals after Western Regional

George Ferguson Havre Daily News sports editor gferguson@havredailynews.com
Published: Monday, February 22nd, 2010

The NAIA wrestling postseason hasn't been in Havre in quite some time. But with six of the top 20 teams in the NAIA in town for the Western Regional on Saturday afternoon, the excitement reached a fever pitch inside the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

Sixth-ranked Southern Oregon showed up to wrestle and took home the regional championship by scoring 152 points, sending nine wrestlers to the finals and winning four individual championships. The Red Raiders outdid a strong team from the University of Great Falls, which finished a distant second, as well as perennial NAIA powers Cal Baptist and Menlo College which finished third and fourth, respectively. Meanwhile, MSU-Northern, which came into Saturday's event as a shorthanded underdog, achieved plenty on its home mat. The Lights scored 52 points, finishing just behind Embry-Riddle, which had 53.5 points. Northern also sent three wrestlers into the finals, placed six overall, and added two more names to its national tournament roster. "We didn't start off very well in the morning," MSU-N head coach Tyson Thivierge said. "But I thought things got a lot better as the day went on. In all, it was a good tournament for us, and we're excited that we got two more kids through to the national tournament."

One of those MSU-N grapplers was senior and team captain Austin Ouelette. The Missoula native was a returning NAIA All-American, but he missed most of this season with injury and was not pre-qualified heading into the regional tournament. Ouelette also dropped from his customary spot at 174 pounds and wrestled at 165 this week. But with the odds stacked against him, he wrestled well early on Saturday and made his way into the 165-pound final where he was defeated by second-seeded Lamar Reed of Cal Baptist 11-3. Ouelette's big win came in the semis against top-seeded Mike Hader of UGF. "Super excited and pumped for Austin Ouelette today," Thivierge said. "There was a lot of pressure on him today because he wasn't qualified and being a returning all american. But he wrestled really well and we are all really excited for him after what he's been through this season."

Northern also got a surprise fourth-place finish from Harlem native Chase Dirden at 133 pounds. The redshirtfreshmen won a huge consolation match on Saturday to make his way to his first national tournament. "Chase was a long shot, but he's a really good wrestler and he's come a long way," Thivierge said. "He proved that
today. And making it to nationals as a freshmen, that will really set the tone for the rest of his wrestling career here. Just really proud of him and what he accomplished today." Along with Oulette, the Lights had two other grapplers in Saturday's finals.

As expected, Evan Hinebauch met up with rival Michael French of UGF in the 184-pound final, and the top two wrestlers in the NAIA waged another great battle. Trailing 3-2 late in the third period, Hinebauch appeared to score a takedown, but the points weren't awarded and French held on for the win. The two will be seeded on opposite sides of the national tournament draw, so another meeting with a national title on the line seems likely. MSU-N senior Evan Mattingly also made it to the 197-pound championship where he too was defeated by a UGF rival. Mattingly lost a 9-0 decision to UGF's Alex Calvi, and those two are also national title contenders in two weeks. Former Blue Pony Ryan Shelstad came up short in his bid to make it to nationals, losing a heartbreaking match in the consolation semifinals, before placing sixth. However, another former HHS standout made plenty of noise on Saturday. At 133 pounds, Myles Mazurkiewicz aided UGF's point total by finishing second to SOU's Brian Jacob. Mazurkiewicz was already pre-qualified for nationals coming in to Saturday's event, and will be a title contender at the national tournament. MSU-N also pre-qualified Steven Quesada for the national tournament which will run March 4-6 in Oklahoma City. "It was a good day for us because while I would have liked to see some of the other guys make it in, we wrestled pretty well against a lot of really good competition," Thivierge said. "We're taking five guys to nationals and I believe every one of them can place for us and be All-Americans. So with how we did today, I'm liking how we are wrestling to end the season. I feel like we're headed in the right direction." In all, the Lights will send Oulette, Hinebauch, Mattingly, Dirden and Quesada to the national tournament.