

Wrestlers denied atop podium, but 8 advance to open

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Paul Calo grapples with his opponent during the 170 pound title bout. The defending New England champion lost his finals match in an ultimate tie breaker at the Class LL championship.

By BRIAN JENNINGS

STAFF WRITER

With a healthy team, Southington coach Derek Dion said that they would have had a good shot at beating out Danbury for the Class LL title. But with the key injuries they had heading into the Class LL Championship, the Knights were aiming for a second to fourth-place finish.

Those keys injuries didn't seem to make a difference.

Eight medalists, including a runner-up, earned the Blue Knights a tie for third out of 25 teams at the Class LL Championship, held at Trumbull High School on Saturday, Feb. 17. Despite a top 3 finish, it wasn't quite what Dion had hoped for.

"We didn't wrestle our best all day," said Dion. "For me, it's really disappointing when your seniors don't get another shot at it. They were disappointed. Our two seniors in the lineup could have won it and didn't meet their goals."

Paul Calo finished as Class LL runner-up after falling to Gino Baratta of Danbury from a 2-1 decision in an ultimate tiebreaker in the 170-pound title match.

“He wasn’t really getting to his shots,” said Dion. “He needs to open up a little bit more. He got a kid that made him different. He just didn’t wrestle like himself the way he’s been wrestling all year. We’ll figure out why and try to fix it for next week.”

Following a scoreless first period, Calo earned the first point of the bout with an escape in the second. Baratta received a stall warning late in the third, but managed to knot the score and eventually send the match into overtime with an escape early in the period. Two extra periods later, Calo was handed a caution warning with 30 seconds to go in the sixth, and Baratta clinched the title with a ride out in the seventh. Calo advanced to the final on three pins and a bye.

“He’s going to have a tough rode in the state open,” said Dion. “He’s going to have to really tighten up some things technically and get his mindset a little bit better. He’s got to open up his offense, and hopefully he can have a good tournament.”

Other Southington medalists included Tagan Welch (3rd, 152), Jacob Vecchio (3rd, 220), Jacob Cardozo (4th, 126), Billy Carr (4th, 160), Caleb Brick (5th, 106), Jason Brault (5th, 132), and Shaun Wagner (5th, 138). Dion said that he felt Welch was the best wrestler in his weight class.

“He had just that one little weird position that he got caught in,” said Dion. “If he didn’t get caught in that position, I felt like he would have won that match pretty easily and probably the tournament. He wrestled back really tough and really showed a lot of courage and character to come back and tough it out for third.”

Danbury (274) won its third-straight Class LL title (20th overall) with 11 medalists, including five champions. Fairfield Warde (200) finished as runner-up with eight medalists, followed by Trumbull (175) with six medalists.

Calo, Welch, Vecchio, Cardozo, Carr, Brick, Brault, and Wagner will represent Southington at the state open.

“I want to see the kids wrestle hungry and hard,” said Dion. “A lot of the time a lot of kids get to the state open and are too tense with what happened at the state tournament. I don’t feel like our kids are really all that content with their placing. So I’m hoping that they’ll come in and take advantage of those kids that are a little complacent.”

The state open is scheduled to be held at Hillhouse High School in New Haven from Friday, Feb. 23 (4:45 p.m. start) to Saturday, Feb. 24 (9 a.m. start). Danbury is the defending state open champion. Dion said that a realistic placing for Southington would be in the top 10.

“It’s such a weird tournament,” said Dion. “A team with four kids on the whole team could place in the top five of this tournament if they’re really good. Usually, around 100 to 120 points wins the tournament, and you can get that from four or five kids if they’re really good.”