

WRESTLING: Open season for the area's best



February 23, 2018 07:00AM

By Sean Krofssik, Record-Journal staff

NEW HAVEN — The State Open is the season highlight for the area's top-notch wrestling talent.

Platt's Ben Stratton and Maloney's Demetre Carnot won state class crowns last week and go in search of State Open glory this Friday and Saturday at the Floyd Little Athletic Center. The Silver City duo, along with Southington junior Paul Calo, are the area's leading contenders to take home an Open crown.

Last weekend, Carnot, a senior, won the Class L 132-pound division at Bristol Central. In Guilford, Stratton, also a senior, claimed the Class M crown at 182 pounds.

Carnot defended his state title at 132.

"It was pretty cool to be a two-timer," Carnot said. "One of four to ever do it at Maloney. It means more to do it alongside [Maloney assistant coach Matt] Banas and [Maloney head coach Eric] Bergeron and my family and friends."

Carnot said the Class L title was his to lose.

"This year was a little different from last year," Carnot said. "Last year, I was never 100 percent that the title would be mine. This year was completely different. After I dropped to 132, the tournament was mine."

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I had a dominant mindset how I was going to do it. It was easier than last year. It's because I put all of that work into the room and was able to get it done."

Carnot is the No. 2 seed for the Open.

"Things are looking very promising for the Open," Carnot said. "My goal in my career is to have an Open title. In my way are going to be Noah Caskey from Montville and Kyle Fields from Danbury. There are a couple others in the mix, but those two are the toughest. If I wrestle my best there's no reason I can't be the Open champ."

Carnot is the winningest grappler to wear Maloney green. He has 146 wins heading into this weekend.

"Just like the class meet, I'm very confident in his draw and him stepping up in the big match. He's going to go out there and compete," Bergeron said. "He was very impressive on Saturday. As the day goes on, he only gets better. He is his best when the matches are the biggest."

Sporting a 36-1 record this winter and 146-19 for his career, Carnot is looking to add an Open crown to his resume. He finished fifth last year as a junior.

Over at Platt, Stratton is coming off his first career state championship.

"It means a lot," Stratton said. "I've been wrestling nine years and I never won a state championship. I've been working this my entire career. The last match I was confident, but under control. I went in there, stayed calm and wrestled my match. I was very nervous, but I looked at my mom during the match and she said, 'You can do it.'"

Stratton, 33-1 this winter, said his accomplishment didn't sink in until he hugged his parents and celebrated with his teammates.

"I'm not stopping at Class M's," Stratton said. "I'm looking for a State Open title and I've never been more ready. I just have to go in and wrestle my match."

If Stratton were able to accomplish his goal, he would be the third wrestler in Platt history to win a State Open championship after Luis Murillo Sr. (1982) and Luis Murillo Jr. (2002).

"We were really excited for him to win the class title," Platt coach Bryan McCarty said. "That was one pillar of his goals. He's been working hard all season and wrestled a lot of these guys and his only loss was at 195 this season.

"His skill level is very high and his determination is there," the veteran coach added. "It's about putting it together in one tournament. He needs to work hard and things will fall into place."

From Southington, a contingent of eight Blue Knights have qualified for the Open. Leading the way is the 170-pounder Calo. A reigning New England champion, Calo was the top seed in Class LL. The junior took second after falling 2-1 in four overtimes to second-seeded Gino Baratta of Danbury.

Calo is 42-2 this season and 115-10 in his career.

"I took him lightly," Calo said about his Class LL final. "I didn't wrestle smart, but I've been working on that. That match showed my weaknesses and what I need to improve on. I just didn't wrestle smart."

Southington coach Derek Dion said Baratta wrestled a perfect match.

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"We have a couple of things we have to work on technically," Dion said. "He got Paul frustrated. We have to learn from that and go back to the drawing board. If they wrestled 10 times, Paul would probably win nine. But that was the one they wrestled, so Paul was disappointed, but he will look to have a better showing this weekend."

Before that defeat, Calo's only other loss this season was at the Eastern States Tournament in New York, when he fell to the No. 8 wrestler in the country in his weight class.

Calo's teammate, senior Tagan Welch, is coming off a third-place finish at 152 at Class LL. He entered as the No. 1 seed and fell 8-6 in the semis before battling back with a pair of pins.

"I definitely expect to do better than I did at LL's," Welch said. "I expect to go far, at least the semifinals, if not the finals. I'm really excited and motivated to go out and try to win."

Dion said Welch fell behind in the first period and couldn't come all the way back.

"Welch had a 10-second lapse last weekend and paid for it," Dion said. "The rest of the match he won. He got caught in the first period in one little position. I think if he wrestled the LL's again he would be the champion. I'm disappointed for him. He showed a lot of character to wrestle back and finish third. It's a testament to his character. Hopefully, he will place and move on to New England's."

Another milestone in reach for Welch is 100 wins. His career total sits at 97 entering Saturday's Open. Welch is 42-10 on the season.

"It would mean a lot since I missed my freshman year with a broken leg," Welch said.

Other grapplers in action this weekend:

■Maloney: Markeese Thompson (160). The senior placed fourth at Class L. ■Platt: James Rondini (113), Jeremy Polanco (120) and Zavian Arroyo (170).

Polanco reached the Class M finals and placed second. Arroyo was third, wrestling back with a pair of wins after falling in the semifinals. Rondini, also a semifinalist, placed fourth in Class M.

■Southington: Caleb Brick (106), Jacob Cardoza (126), Jason Brault (132), Shaun Wagner (138), William Carr (160) and Jacob Vecchio (220) of Southington.

Vecchio was a third-place finisher at Class LL with a pin in the consie finals. Cardoza and Carr both placed fourth. Brick, Brault and Wagner were fifth.