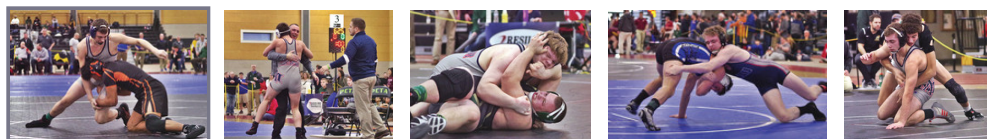


Wilkins becomes newest New England champ from MAU



Sam Wilkins fights off a takedown attempt during the New England final on Saturday in Providence, R.I. Wilkins won the match 7-2 to become the first New England champ for MAU since 2015-16.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY CASSANDRA SAMROV



Posted Sunday, March 4, 2018 9:18 pm

By Adam Samrov, Bennington Banner

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — The 100th career victory in a wrestler's career is usually one of the more memorable wins. It shows the time and dedication put into the training to have your hand raised that many times.

For Mount Anthony sophomore Sam Wilkins, win No. 102 will be a bit more memorable.

Wrestling at 195 pounds, Wilkins' 102nd career win was for a New England championship — the first for the Patriots since the 2015-16 season.

"Sam just has a desire to win and refuses to lose," said MAU coach Brian Coon.

Facing Greater Lawrence (Mass.)' Malib Pastrana in the final, Wilkins looked confidence and wrestled the same way, scoring a takedown to get the lead in the first period and an escape in the second to make it 3-0 going into the third.

"He's good with his hips and head and he's good at riding the legs, which is a big advantage for him against bigger [wrestlers]," Coon said.

Starting in the down position in the final period, Wilkins fought his way back into control for a 5-0 lead and eventually finished off a 7-2 victory with a huge smile on his face and a leap into Coon's arms.

"He dominated the final. He was calm and composed, he didn't look like a 15-year-old [sophomore] in the New England

final," Coon said. "As soon as he got that reverse, I knew we had the match won."

In the semifinal, Wilkins wrestled the Massachusetts all-state champion, Travis Manick from Methuen — someone he had lost to at the Methuen Tournament earlier in the year.

During their New England match, Wilkins got the upper hand early with a takedown in the first period, then took a 3-0 lead after an escape.

Manick earned a takedown of his own with 50 seconds left in the bout before Wilkins scored a takedown with 15 seconds to go, advancing to the final.

"I wrestled him before, I knew that I had what it took," Wilkins said. "I knew I trained correctly and my training partners pushed me all season. I knew I was ready."

145-pounder Keegan Coon, a sixth-place finisher himself, said he was happy to watch Wilkins win the championship.

"He's like a brother to me, I've known him almost all of my life," Coon said. "It was almost like I was out there with him."

As a team, on the strength of Wilkins' victory and three other New England place finishers — Coon, Tyler Burgess and Calvin Hayford — the Patriots were second with 80 points, edged out by three points by Ponaganset, R.I.

Burgess, the fourth-place finisher at 152 pounds, had a chance to put his team into a tie with a victory in the third-place match, but came up just short in a 3-2 defeat to Granby, Conn.'s Noah Fleming. Three of Burgess' six losses this season came to Fleming.

"I didn't finish how I wanted to, our team just fell short," Burgess said. "I left it all on the mat, my last match senior year, I had nothing to lose and just let it fly."

Burgess lost to Fleming in the winners' bracket, 6-3, in the quarterfinals, before winning three matches in the consolations to reach the third-place match.

"It makes for a long day [coming back] but if you have the heart you can do it," Burgess said. "Since Keegan and I were back-to-back, he would win and [assistant coach Jeremy] Burns would say, now it's your turn. I wanted to see [Fleming] again, that's what I train for."

Calvin Hayford wrestled back for fifth place at 285 pounds, ending his high school career with a placement at New England.

He pinned Nashoba (Mass.)' Duncan Wilgress-Pipe in 2:43 to end the tournament on a high note.

"It felt good to have my final match with a stick (pin)," Hayford said. "I was disappointed with the placement, but it was great to get the extra points for our team. To know I was fifth place, while sick, and get a stick in the New England is a magical thing for me. It's been a great three years for me at MAU."

At 145 pounds, sophomore Keegan Coon came back after a loss in the quarterfinals to place sixth overall.

Coon lost to Oyster River (N.H.)'s Noah Strout, but went into the consolation renewed, winning a pair of matches to reach the placement round.

In the match to determine third and fifth, Coon lost to Danbury's AJ Kovacs, arguably the top wrestler in the 145-pound class.

In the fifth-place match, he wrestled Nashoba's Brevin Cassella, taking a 2-0 lead to the third period after a late reversal.

But in the third, Coon allowed a pair of takedowns and gave up a penalty point in a 6-5 defeat.

"We put in a lot of work in the practice room," Keegan Coon said. "We needed to fight back to have a chance [in the team competition]. After last year, finishing 1-2, I felt that I wanted it a lot more."

A handful of Patriots were dealing with some health issues, which played into some less than stellar results.

Keenan Taylor injured his leg in his opening match, ending up 0-2 after a sixth-place finish last year. Gage McLaughlin was 0-2 as well, but it was a big deal for him to just be competing, as Coon said McLaughlin had been dealing with flu during the week leading up to New Englands.

"Gage had a 103-degree fever earlier this week, so to go out there and try to compete at a high level is something," Coon said.

Noah Call, dealing with his own flu around the state tournament, was still not 100 percent and finished 1-2. Chris Mayer was 1-2 at 182 pounds, dealing with some sickness as well.

Julian Granger was 0-2 at 120 pounds in his first New England tournament, while Adam Osha was 2-2 at 160 pounds.

At 220 pounds, Colin Crowley was 3-2 overall and finished one match short of placement. He won his opening match, but lost to Alex Buteau, the New Hampshire state champion in the quarterfinal.

Coming back, he beat two opponents, including the Rhode Island champion, before facing Pinkerton Academy's Robert Fahey out of New Hampshire.

After a scoreless first period, Fahey got an escape in the second to take a 1-0 lead. In the third, Crowley escaped to tie the score but with seconds remaining, he was given a second stalling call in the match, giving Fahey the eventual winning point.

"He loses on a fleeing the mat call with 30 seconds left, that's a tough call to lose your last high school match," Coon said.

Burgess was frank about the narrow team defeat.

"No matter how we finished [individually], I'm proud," Burgess said. "It hurts more being second as a team then fourth as an individual. We sacrifice our whole life for that, but we couldn't reach high enough to get it."

At the end of the day, however, it was all about the newest New England champion from Mount Anthony.

"I was so happy for [Sam], I didn't even feel the weight [jumping into my arms]," Coon said. "It's great to see the hard work pay off and hopefully open up opportunities for him."