

BLAIR

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March 2, 2026 Newsletter

Dear Friends of Blair Wrestling,

Wrestling Season Wrap-up

I want to use this newsletter to review our last two events, our dual at Wyoming Seminary and the National Preps tournament, and to offer some closing comments on the team and our recent Olympic mentor. National Preps also has a girls' tournament, with several of our wrestlers competing.

Wyoming Seminary Dual

On February 7, we had a convincing win over Wyoming Seminary, 42-26. It's always good to beat the Blue Knights. They came to the match riding high, having had a solid win over Delbarton. Our guys really stepped up with bonus point efforts. Mikey Batista '27, Vin Anello '27 and Cael Mielnik '27 all pinned their opponents. Eric Bocanegra '27 and TJ Kellas '28 had tech falls, and Weston Borgers '28 and Barry Norman '26 earned major decisions.

National Preps Tournament - Boys

This tournament was a roller coaster for us. We had a great first day, with 13 of our 14 wrestlers earning National Prep All-American status by being placewinners. We came out of Friday deadlocked with Lake Highland Prep (LHP), putting 10 of our wrestlers in the semifinals.

Saturday morning was a huge disappointment for the team. Only Vin Anello and Salah Tsarni '27 made the finals. We also had some injuries, which prevented them from advancing and earning team points. It was one of those sessions where almost everything that could go wrong did go wrong. So the coaches and wrestlers will all put this in our rearview mirror and build on all the great things they've accomplished this year.

Despite the disappointment in the morning session, the team bounced back in the placement matches. Apart from those injured, all of our wrestlers fought hard and had some impressive victories. Even when they didn't win, everyone put in a complete effort until the final whistle.

Jack Anello '29 came in the fourth seed and finished fourth. Jack fell short of his goal to win the tournament with a tough semifinal round. He was up 6-0 in the match, and then had a takedown call reversed (a bad call in my view), which put him back 3-0. I think that flustered Jack, while giving the LHP wrestler momentum. Jack gave up a takedown late in the match, and eventually lost 6-4. Jack has been cutting a good amount of weight this year, and Blair has been a lot for him in many dimensions. My relationship with Jack keeps growing, and he is someone that I am really fond of. He is loyal and fierce, and you will see Jack get a lot bigger, which will allow him to thrive in training and growing as a wrestler and student.

Eric Bocanegra came in the fifth seed and finished third. Eric had a breakout tournament, and I was really pleased with his effort. He lost a difficult semifinals to a tough Liam Davis. However, he had two huge wins over the fourth seed in the quarters, beating him again in the third-place match. Eric hit his stride this season after an earlier knee injury. Beating a really tough wrestler in the quarters and then doing it again for third/fourth showed how tough he is. Eric is becoming a leader in his own right, with a strong sense of self. One of the things that makes Eric special is that he is able to comfortably move between any group at Blair, and adapt in a really great way. Eric is also looking at, and being recruited by, some great colleges.

Mikey Batista did not get what he wanted in this tournament, but he did come back and take third, and that showed a lot of heart at a time when he wasn't feeling great mentally

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or emotionally. Batista is an all-timer, and by that, I mean everyone loves Mikey—he’s unbelievably funny and he has taught me to relax more. Mikey got caught in a cradle in the semifinals and was pinned by the Wyoming Seminary wrestler. Mikey has pinned this opponent in previous bouts, so this was tough for him. As many people know, Mikey is committed to the University of Maryland for wrestling, which is in the Big Ten conference. I have said it before, but Mikey is slowly learning about the importance of effort and attitude, and less about winning and losing. Training in that way allows you to thrive in the big matches. Putting on a show is when Mikey does best, and every match should be a show—a show of dominance and fight. Mikey has had a good year, and I know he wants more. He will learn a lot from this.

Wyatt Stauffer '28 stepped in at 126 lbs. for Finnegan O'Brien '28 and had a tough loss in the pre-quarter finals. He came back and started getting on a roll to the round of 12 and lost a close match to the No. 1 seed, who was upset in the quarters. Baseline defense is something that Wyatt will address, but also, Wyatt is figuring out what he wants out of wrestling. The sky is the limit for him. He is as consistent as they come in all he does. Although he was understandably disappointed, he’s starting to understand that fight and emotion are assets in wrestling. Wyatt is one of the most reliable wrestlers on the team, and his attitude is always awesome.

Vin Anello lost a tough match in the finals, coming up short against a really strong opponent who transferred into Lake Highland Prep mid-year. Vin continues to improve, and his bottom work will keep getting better. He got stuck in a leg ride in the third period. Vin is disciplined in his wrestling and fundamentals. He will learn a lot from this match, especially finding more attacks and options. Vin is emerging as a leader on the team, and he has had a great year. Vin is committed to Princeton University.

Ryan Rios '26, one of our seniors, lost in the quarter finals to a wrestler from Lake Highland Prep who has beaten him previously. His knee was bothering him, but he kept going and won his match in the round of 12 to place in the tournament. Ultimately, Ryan made the decision to medically default and withdraw due to his knee. Ryan has had a tough high school career, especially as it relates to injuries. This was the first full year of wrestling for Ryan, and even though it wasn’t perfect, he finished as an All-American. Ryan will look back and realize that Blair has been a great place for him.

Weston Borgers, a sophomore, continues to evolve as a wrestler but more importantly, as a young man. His ability to communicate effectively and show fight has been something that has brought a lot of joy to this team. Weston wrestled Matt O’Neil in the semifinals from Malvern, and it was not his best performance. He tweaked his knee in the first scoring scenario, and I think that bothered him. However, Weston came back and battled for third place, displaying pure heart and toughness. You will see Weston get a lot bigger physically and he will continue to grow into a leadership position on the team.

Benji Koch '26 came in as the 10th seed and finished seventh. I couldn’t be more proud of Benji and his efforts. I find myself being more vocal in his matches than anyone else, and I think that’s because I’ve just seen how far he’s come since his first year. Benji dominated in his seventh-place match, and I was really proud of his efforts. Benji is heading to Williams College next year.

Joe Schinder '27 came in as the eighth seed. He lost a tough match in the quarterfinals to Zeno Moore, the No. 1 seed from Lake Highland Prep. After the match, Joe battled hard in his round of 12 to win, and then in the morning, he wrestled a tough Wyoming Seminary opponent. In the match, Joe broke a bone in his elbow and was forced to default. It was a tough way for the tournament to end for Joe. Joe’s maturity and attitude improves each year, and he is a total team guy.

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Barry Norman had a crazy quarter-final win against Lucas Boe, who ended up taking third place, and then lost a tough semifinal to the eventual champ. Unfortunately, Barry suffered a concussion in his semifinal match, and he had to medically default out of the tournament. To see where he has come from since ninth grade has been amazing. Barry had plans to win this tournament, and he fell a bit short, but he will learn from this experience. One area that has improved over the years for Barry is how he has learned to navigate through tough injuries. For that, I am really proud of him. I'm going to miss Barry a lot.

Ryan Meier '26 finished the tournament in fifth with two good wins over the fourth seed from Malvern Prep. Ryan dominated for fifth, and I was proud of his effort coming back. It is pretty awesome to see where Ryan was in ninth grade and now to see him wrestle in his first National Prep Tournament. Ryan is a technical wrestler, and he is going to an amazing school in Northwestern University. However, one reason Ryan has emerged as a leader on our team and someone everyone loves is because he cares so much about his school and the team.

Salah Tsarni continues to jump levels in this sport. He was awarded every major award at the tournament, including the Dalling Award (most falls in least amount of time), Major Ray Mendoza Award (highest total team points) and the Outstanding Wrestler Award. Salah teched his opponent in the finals, and he pinned his way through the rest of the tournament. Although he is only a junior, Salah is exemplifying our system of wrestling at the highest level, always with a positive attitude. Salah is committed to the Air Force Academy.

Connor Bercume '26 wrestled at 215 lbs. for this tournament and was the sixth seed. Connor finished in fourth place and almost knocked off the second seed in the semifinals. He lost in the ultimate ride out. Connor is a post-graduate and heading to Harvard University next year. In only one year, he has become a mentor to many of the kids at this school. He is

a complete student and wrestler. I'm really proud of his effort, and he will only get better.

Cael Mielnik had a great season, and I know he wanted to finish on top, but he came back for third in dominating fashion. Cael has been a leader all year for this team, and he has been one of the most consistent members on the team. He was understandably worn out after his semifinal loss, but the way he responded showed the type of character he has.

Other Key Team Members

There are a number of members of the team who have wrestled in key matches and tournaments all year but who were not part of the National Prep roster. All of these wrestlers will be instrumental parts of the team next year and they've been key to making our entire team better. They include:

Anthony Curlo '28
Eddie George '28
TJ Kellas '28
Vedwin Nivas '28
Finnegan O'Brien '28

National Preps Tournament - Girls

We had three members of our girls' team compete in the tournament. This is now the fourth year that the National Preps has had a women's division and the competition continues to get better every year. As a team, they finished in fourth place. The other three teams that finished ahead of us all had at least twice as many competitors in the field.

At 126 lbs., **Sela Rozov '27** finished in second place. Sela continues to improve as a wrestler, having finished fourth at this event a year ago, and has made great strides over the course of the year. She lost to a tough, nationally ranked opponent from Choate in the finals but put together three impressive wins to get there. The next step in her development will be her finding ways to beat that next level of competition.

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At 132 lbs., **Corynne McNulty '27** finished in second as well. Corynne is one of the best female wrestlers in the country and got to the finals with three quick, dominant wins. She faced a good opponent from Wyoming Seminary who has had a great year and was caught on her back after building an early lead. Corynne will look to bounce back this spring and hopefully make a World Team.

Finally, at 165 lbs. **Sarah Henckel '26** also finished in second place. Like Corynne, Sarah is a highly accomplished wrestler who came into the tournament having won it the past three years. Her final opponent was also from Wyoming Seminary and was very athletic. She took the lead over Sarah late in the match with a throw. Sarah holds herself to a high standard and knows there are key areas she will need to improve to achieve the lofty goals she has. She, too, will be competing for a World Team this April. Sarah will be attending Lehigh University next year.

Final Thoughts

This season has been a really good season for us. We had some great individual, dual and tournament wins. More than the victories, this year has been great because of the type of kids that are on this team and the development that they've all shown.

Some Things I'll Take Away from This Year

Team Support - Our team includes both boys and girls. It includes wrestlers in the lineup for an event and those who are not. They practice together, respect and support one another, coach and teach one another, and they cheer for one another. The bonds they have built and are building will sustain them throughout their lives.

Maturity - It is a privilege to watch these young people develop from young kids to independent adults ready to make their mark on the world.

Breadth - These highly skilled athletes are far more than wrestlers. They have broad interests and accomplishments and are just fine human beings who are a pleasure to be with. They are funny, sensitive, caring, patient and passionate.

I speak for all the coaching staff in saying that it has been an honor and privilege to be part of their young lives.

Kotaro Kiyooka

We have been fortunate to have Kotaro Kiyooka, a 65-kg. freestyle gold medalist who represented Japan at the 2024 Summer Olympics, with us at Blair Academy for five days this spring. It has been amazing to say the least. We've been able to train, eat and socialize together, as a team. There are two critical components of Kotaro that I hope our team takes away from this experience. First, Kotaro is incredibly appreciative of the opportunity to work with students and generous with his time here. He truly is grateful and sincere in all he does. Second, Kotaro is incredibly efficient in everything he does. There is no time wasted, ever! And, he does it with a smile on his face. That is exactly the kind of energy and standard I want on our team and something we strive for each day. It is probably a huge reason why he is a gold medalist.

Connections are a huge part of our lives, and this experience would not have happened without Mitsu Kurokawa '03. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for making the connection. Mitsu has been on campus with Kotaro seeing old friends and spending time with Blair students and our community.

Best,

Ross Gitomer