

# Metro East Lutheran High School Wrestlers Advance To IWCOA State Tournament

by Chris Rhodes, Reporter  
June 24 2021 11:54 AM



EDWARDSVILLE - Where the IHSA left off, the IWCOA (Illinois Wrestling Coaches and Officials Association) picked up. Some teams opted out of the IHSA season and participated in the IHSA regular season but declined to participate in the post-season

sponsored by the IWCOA. Metro East Lutheran was an area team that stayed the course through both.

Two wrestlers who led the charge for the Knights were sophomore Elijah Schlessinger and junior Chad Gray. Both wrestlers finished in fourth place in their weight classes at the Class 1A Sectional held at Lawrenceville. The top four sectional place-winners advance to the IWCOA Class 1A State Championships, which will be Thursday, June 24, at the Springfield Convention Center.

At the sectional at 160 pounds, Chad Gray started his day with a takedown in the first period and followed up with a pin in the second period against senior Zac Slifer of Effingham. After a loss to Dayton Hoffman of Murphysboro in the semifinals, Gray had to regroup in a “must-win” match in the consolation semifinals. The suspense ended early when Gray tackled Justin Proctor and took him straight to his back for a pin in just 1 minute 23 seconds. The two had wrestled two times previously, with Gray winning by 6 points and 4 points in those matches.

In the third-place match, Gray lost to host Lawrenceville’s Brian Seed. Gray led at one point 3-2 before getting pinned by Seed. Gray takes a 23-16 record to Springfield. Gray was not the first MELHS wrestler to qualify for state however because Schlessinger wrestled at a lighter weight-132, and got on the mat in the consolation semifinals before Gray.

“Elijah’s big match was the quarterfinal match. We were a bit of an underdog in that match. He held his poise very well. The guy was a great counter-wrestler. They can be hard to beat. I knew it was a big win when another coach came by and said it was an upset. He has improved from week to week and took advantage of wrestling really good competition along the way. In some ways, the revamped scheduling due to COVID helped us in the state series. Some great matches under pressure by a sophomore.”

Schlessinger went 3-2 on the day. He won his first match when his opponent from Olney did not make the weigh-in. That advanced him to the quarterfinals of the 12-man bracket, for a match with Peyton Holt of Tolono Unity High School. Holt was 19-2 on the year coming into the match. The match played out more like a chess match. Neither wrestler scored in the first period. Schlessinger chose the down position and scored an escape to take a 1-0 lead. Holt then scored a takedown and took a 2-1. Schlessinger got an escape and a takedown of his own later in the second period to take a 4-2 lead. Holt escaped making the score 4-3 after two periods. In the third period, Schlessinger started in the top position and countered several reversals and escape attempts, and won 4-3. Holt had finished 2nd in his regional, while Schlessinger was 3rd at the Sacred Heart-Griffin regional.

“I am so proud of the team this year and especially for Elijah and Chad. We persevered, working around vacations, graduations, cancellations, etc. We lost our senior leader to military service in late May - Jakob Schroeder. I am happy for Jakob because he left an imprint on his teammates that you could see as we continued to improve throughout the year. It is the summer but I think Chad and Elijah’s classmates, teachers, and administrators will be stoked to hear what these guys have done. This is my seventh year coaching MELHS wrestling. It took seven years and a pandemic, but we now have wrestlers in the state tournament,” Coach Muther said.

Schlessinger met Parker Hopkins of Warrensburg-Latham in the semifinals. Hopkins, a senior with a 24-1 record, built a 3-0 record after two periods. Hopkins started period 3 in the top position and held Schlessinger there so the match ended 3-0.

He would meet Ashtin Carver of Litchfield in the consolation semifinal, with the winner advancing to the 3rd place match and to a place in the state tournament. Like Grey’s “must-win” match, this match was the third time Schlessinger and Carver had met this season, with Schlessinger victorious in both previous matches. Carver scored first with a takedown this time for an early 2-0 lead. Elijah got the lead back in the second period with a takedown and a near fall. In period 3, the Knights fans erupted when Schlessinger secured a cradle and pinned Carver at the 4 minutes 58-second mark. In the 3rd place match, Elijah lost to Cutter Prater of Vandalia, who qualified for the state tournament last year. Schlessinger won the regular season match with Prater.

“Chad maybe had a bit of nerves. He is a strong kid and some of his moves are hard for guys to stop. That came in handy in that consolation match in what people call the “blood round”. Once he took the Vandalia wrestler to the mat, he barely moved. In a few seconds, it was over. Anyone who has practiced with Chad - he wears you out. He has a great work ethic and intensity. His team is very proud of him.”

Schlessinger and Gray will be in action Thursday in the opening round for the IWCOA State Tournament in downtown Springfield at the BOS Center.