

Going for three: Hoisington's Ball following in brothers' footsteps

BY MIKE COURSON

For most wrestlers, a single state championship would signal a successful prep career. The Ball family in Hoisington has set the bar a little higher. Heading into his senior campaign, Christopher Ball already has two state titles and a second-place finish. That wasn't even the best at the family's Thanksgiving table this year.

Christopher's brother, Brandon, won four state titles in high school and earned All-American honors as a redshirt freshman at Fort Hays State University last year. Christopher's other brother, Jonathan, made the state finals twice in three seasons, winning a championship last year before redshirting at FHSU this year. Christopher will join his brothers in Hays next year.

"They all have goals that are specific to them, and each wants the next to be as successful as possible," said Hoisington coach Dan Schmidt. "When in conversation with them about their success, they always tend to drift back to the team accomplishments. Not to say they are not very proud of what they have been able to achieve individually."

Christopher is one tough opponent from seeking his own fourth title this fall. In 2015, Brandon was a senior and Christopher was a freshman. All three of the Ball brothers wrestled for state championships that year in back-to-back-to-back weight classes.

"It was definitely a really cool experience for all three of us to be in the finals at state," Christopher said. "Where do you see three brothers in the finals? That was really cool that we were all there."

First, Brandon defeated Greeley County's Caleb Austin. Austin, a transfer from Kentucky, had previously ended Brandon's long unbeaten streak. Brandon picked up points in the final seconds of that match to win one of the most exciting matches in state tournament history. Jonathan followed in another exciting match, losing 3-2 in a tiebreak.

That set the stage for Christopher's first state championship match. St. Mary's Greg Tooley entered that match with a perfect record and tech felled the then-freshman Ball to win a second state title. Tooley is now a member of the FHSU wrestling team and earned all-American honors last year.

With Tooley out of the way in 2016, Christopher again made it back to the finals at 152 pounds, this time earning a 6-5 decision against Rossville sophomore Isaiah Luellen to cap a perfect 41-0 season.

As a junior, Ball lost his unbeaten streak with a 5-2 loss to Holcomb's Tanner Johnson on Dec. 3, 2016. Two months later, Ball lost again, this time a 4-3 decision to Pratt's Nick Lucas. Ball had previously handed Lucas a 6-2 loss in Hays. Lucas went on to place second in Class 4A.

"The two kids Christopher lost to were both outstanding," Schmidt said. "The sport of wrestling at the top can be razor thin, and on the day they wrestled Christopher they were on their A-game and beat him."

"I thought his focus was a bit lacking when he got beat and let him know so. There will be kids this year that will also be ready to wrestle him, and he will have to be ready. On any given day anyone can be beat. Do not allow that to happen when it means the most is what I told him."

Ball got his focus back.



Hoisington senior Christopher Ball made quick work of Norton's Trenton Wright in the Class 3-2-1A 152-pound state championship match. Ball has advanced to the state finals in each of his first three seasons, winning titles in 2016 and 2017. (photo by Mike Courson)

Just a week after falling to Lucas, he won a regional title. A week after that, Ball dominated his way through the state bracket.

Championship Saturday again featured back-to-back title matches featuring Ball brothers. Jonathan Ball won a major decision in the 145-pound championship for his first state title. Christopher followed with a first-period pin against Norton's Trenton Wright to capture his second title at 152 pounds.

For the Balls, all those state titles are just the payoff for a decade of hard work. Christopher picked up the sport 11 years ago and recalls going to practice twice a day...once with the younger kids, then again with older kids.

"Once we were too old to do the younger practices, we'd do a whole workout before practice that was harder than practice itself," he said. "Also, after practice we'd take those moves home."

The Balls and other area wrestlers also worked under Daryl Lucas, who was making an hour drive from Pratt to coach in Barton County. "Daryl was a great coach," Christopher said. "We wouldn't be where we are today without him. He was an amazing coach and we got the technique from a young age. Even today, I'm still using moves and technique I learned when I was 8-10 years old because of him."

"Coach Schmidt picked up where Coach Lucas left off. He has encouraged us all to drive for excellence on and off the mat."

The brothers were also getting help at home. Christopher's father, Bruce, had been a gymnast and a coach of gymnasts. He and his brother worked with the young Ball boys to get their bodies in shape for whichever sport they tackled.

"Physically, per body weight, we're all pretty strong," Christopher said. "That's also what our dad worked on with us when we were younger. We'd do pull-ups. We'd be at 25 and keep going. My dad would help us get those last five or six pull-ups when our arms were dead. We'd go from pull-ups to push ups and do as many as we could, then do 10 more on our knees. Then we went back to pull-ups."

"To be a great athlete, whatever sport you're doing, you have to be able to train and push yourself to exhaustion. I don't like doing it either, but to be good, you have to push yourself to exhaustion."

No matter the sport, the Balls excelled behind their hard work. They could have been baseball players but turned into track sensations instead. Brandon won the Class 3A pole vault title in 2015 and Jonathan finished second. Last spring, Jonathan led the entire state in the event before winning his first Class 3A title. Christopher has finished fourth in the

event in each of the last two seasons and finished sixth as a freshman. He will be one of the favorites to win the event in the spring.

"Whatever it was, we'd always take that thing home and work on it," Christopher said. "Since we had brothers, we were always competing. Jonathan and I, after football practice, we'd get home and grab our football gear. It was full-speed running and I'd tackle him or he'd tackle me. It didn't matter what it was, our dad really pushed us."

Schmidt, who doubles as the school's track and field coach, works with the brothers two seasons out of the year. He, too, has seen the hard work behind the scenes pay off.

"There are many factors that go into why the Ball brothers are so good on the mat, and I am not certain that one outweighs the others," he said. "Start with good parenting. They grew up in an environment where giving your best effort at all times, and in all phases of your life, was expected. Simply showing up was not good enough, and that applied to all aspects of their life: God, family, daily tasks, etc."

"They were blessed with great skills and took advantage of them with strong commitment to improving those skills every day, even on the days they did not feel good. They had competition not just at practice, but daily growing up with five boys in the family."

"Each boy has tried to be better than the other, but always in a good way. They study the sport, and maximize the coaching they get to their advantage. They have also been blessed with some great teammates to workout with. All of them would tell you that part of getting to the top is competing with kids who are at the top or striving to get there, which has been the case with them."

Wrestling, in many ways, is an individual sport, but there is also the team. In two of the last three seasons, Hoisington has finished second in Class 3-2-1A. Norton has won the last five and seven of the last eight team championships in the classification. Last winter, the Cardinals came up just one win here or there from beating Norton for the team title.

The Ball brothers, with so many runs to the finals, have contributed countless points to the team. This year, the Cardinals will again have to contend with Norton. Scott City - the only team to beat Norton since 2010 - returns to Class 3A this year as another solid contender.

Christopher will do his part for the team this year by staying at 152 pounds. "I was planning on wrestling at 160 but then I got sick and lost about 10 pounds in a month," he said. "152 is going to be

an open weight class on our team. It'd be better for me to wrestle there and let some other guys fill in the other gaps."

Staying at 152 has some individual perks as well. Jonathan Ball and Hoxie's Tristan Porsch both graduated after tremendous careers, so those threats are gone from the 145-pound ranks. Four of the top-six wrestlers at 152 have graduated, leaving the door wide open for Christopher to three-peat.

Rossville's Luellen, who lost that 6-5 championship battle to Christopher in 2015, moved up to 160 last year to win the state title. Ball is content to let Luellen have that weight class. "If I moved up to 160, that'd be a great match," he said.

Heading into his final season, Ball wants that third title, and he would prefer to do it with a perfect record. That means being on top of his game every day and not taking any match for granted.

"Just like Brandon's senior year, there wasn't really anyone, then Caleb Austin came in from Kentucky," he said. "You never know. You can be sick a day. It really doesn't matter. You just train yourself like you have in the past and keep pushing yourself to exhaustion."

"We have talked, and he knows that every year is a new one," said Schmidt. "You cannot live off the past. If you want to be great you have to do the



Ball opened the 2016 state tournament with a first-period pin against Sterling's Zane Nichols. Ball later won the state title to finish the season with a perfect 41-0 record. (photo by Mike Courson)

things that allow greatness to come forth. Taking care of your body, doing the right things in his public and private life, and training harder and smarter than any opponent he will face.

"The season is not a sprint, it's more like a marathon so pace yourself accordingly. I coach not just Christopher but all of our wrestlers with the understanding that getting

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to be part of this sport and season is a gift. Use it wisely for tomorrow it may be taken away from you."

Have a Great Season Cardinals!

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