

By Randy Whalen

If one encountered Justin Wardlow in public, one would be impressed by his polite demeanor, his faith, and how well the young man carries himself.

While the Lockport Township sophomore is one of the nicest people you'd ever meet, he's also something else.

A fierce competitor.

Wardlow recently placed second in the state for the second straight season in the Illinois High School Association State Wrestling Tournament. That came at 138 pounds in Class 3A on Saturday, February 17 at the State Farm Center in Champaign.

"It's just my belief in God and what I practice," Wardlow said of his demeanor. Wrestling is not everything, I just want to be a good person no matter what I do. I want to do the right thing.

"My spiritual being and faith is something I learned to tool, to just be a good person."

Wardlow isn't only a good person, he's a good wrestler. Excellent in fact.

"He's super humble and nice and then he gets on the mat and is super aggressive," Lockport coach Jameson Oster said. "The best know how to turn it on and off and he has a switch where he can turn it on the mat. He just goes out and gets on it."

At this season's state final, which started on Thursday, February 15, Wardlow had a tough first-round matchup as he faced senior Damian Resendez from Mt. Carmel and won 9-4. Resendez, who helped the Caravan win the Class 3A team championship a week later, wrestled back to capture sixth place.

On Friday, February 16, Wardlow won his quarterfinal bout by a 7-3 decision over DeKalb junior Hudson Iken. Then later in the day, Wardlow pulled out an amazing semifinal Wardlow won in a tiebreaker over Marist junior Donavon Allen by a count of 4-3. Allen went on to take third by winning a tiebreaker match by a 5-4 count.

Wardlow trailed in the final seconds of regulation but got a late takedown to tie it. He was very emotional afterward.

"In the semi, he wrestled a kid he grew up with, so there was a lot of familiarity there," Oster said. "Late in the match, he got a takedown and then an escape to win it. He let out a scream and that's something I hadn't seen from him. It was different that he celebrated something and I think it's good."

Getting to the final again, on Saturday, February 17, was something to celebrate.

"I got a late takedown and then just rode it out," Wardlow said of his semifinal win. "I was screaming, I was so happy I won the match. It was the most emotion that I've shown in my life."

It was also a much different emotion than he had last season when he literally survived the semifinal match to become the first Porter freshman to advance to a state title bout.

But it was just an adventure for him to get there. as he broke his elbow in the third period of the 120-pound state semifinal but continued to go and held on for a 6-5 victory over Teddy Flores from Maine South. But due to his injury, Wardlow couldn't wrestle for the title and medical forfeited to senior Massey Odiotti from Loyola Academy, who became the first state champion in that school's history.

This year he got to wrestle for the title.

"It was pretty cool to be on a stage like that," Wardlow said of wrestling for the title. "It was really big and pretty awesome to wrestle in front of everyone."

It was, even if the result wasn't what he wanted.

In the title match, Marmion Academy sophomore Zach Stewart (30-8) prevailed by a 6-3 decision over Wardlow, who finished the season with a 42-7 record.

"I was down 3-2 late and at the end, I tried a big move," Wardlow said of the championship match. "I tried a twist, didn't get it, and he got three points. He exposed a position that I was uncomfortable with."

Oster knows that Wardlow will learn from this.

"It was nice he got to wrestle in the finals and his opponent slowed it down," Oster said. "It's always a close match (with Stewart) and hopefully we will see them again next year and know how to game plan."

Next season should be a very good one for the Porters. They were young this season and only had two seniors in the regional lineup. They were Wojtek Chrobak at heavyweight and Cyrus Czyz at 215 pounds.

Two of this season's underclassmen for Lockport also made it to state and each won a match. At 132 pounds, junior Liam Zimmerman (38-16) lost a 15-5 major decision to Hersey senior Maksim Mukhamedaliyev, who lost 3-2 to eventual second-place finisher, Marist junior Michael Esteban in the quarterfinals, but won four straight matches after that to take third.

In the first consolation round, Zimmerman won by a 5-3 decision over junior Luke Morrison from Maine South. But in the second consolation round Zimmerman lost 8-4 to Minooka senior Cale Stonitsch.

At 165, junior Durango Valles (38-16) also went 1-2. He dropped a high-scoring 13-9 opening decision to Prospect senior Connor Munn. Then, in the consolation bracket, Valles had a big pin at the 4:27 mark against Mount Carmel junior Kevin Kalchbrenner. But then Valles was pinned in 3:42 by senior Owen Uppinghouse from Quincy.

Uppinghouse (56-1) lost for the first and only time all season to senior Gunnar Garelli from Lyons Township by a count of 5-1 in the quarterfinals. Garelli (47-3) went on to take second while Uppinhouse won his four wrestleback matches to place third.

So things look bright for the Porters with all three state qualifiers, plus many more good wrestlers, expected back next season. If Wardlow were to place the next two years, he would match his coach, Oster, as the only 4-time medal winners in Lockport history.

"I'll probably continue to move up in weight class," Wrdlow said of his plans for next season. "I'll just go out and wrestle my hardest, wrestle every part well, and have fun."