

# SPORTS



## State champion from front

PHOTOS BY EVAN MICHEALSON  
Elijah Novak raises his arms triumphantly after defeating Max Balow for the Minnesota State High School League Wrestling State Tournament Class AA heavyweight 285-pound individual championship March 5 at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. Novak's title came at the conclusion of a brilliant 48-0 senior season.

## Novak bids fantastic farewell to high school career

BY EVAN MICHEALSON  
STAFF WRITER

As the final whistle in the Class AA 285-pound state championship match echoed across the Xcel Energy Center floor March 5, a long-awaited goal had finally been completed for Foley High School senior Elijah Novak.

After a triumphant yell and a victory hug with assistant coach Jake Helmin and head coach Chris Ratke, Novak turned immediately to the stands and ran.

Running up the aisle, he embraced his mother, Joan Novak, as the Foley fan sec-

tion cheered on the Falcons' state champion in St. Paul.

"It meant everything," Novak said. "After seeing so many state champions run up those stands and hug their family, I was like, 'That's what I want to do. That's what I want to celebrate.'"

This blissful moment came after a hard-fought 5-4 victory over Lake City's Max Balow, capping off an undefeated season that rarely saw the state superstar in a pressure-filled situation. This final match, however, proved to be an exception as the two heavyweight standouts entered the third period tied.

Novak got an important takedown about halfway through the final period as Balow tried to force his way out of bounds to restart the position. Foley's lone state finalist was not going to let that happen, grabbing Balow's leg and bringing the fellow Greco-Roman wrestler to the ground.

"At first, I was going to let him go outside the circle and restart in the center, but then I realized, 'Wait, I'm stronger than him. I can hold his leg in and get this takedown if I do it smartly and properly,'" Novak said.

Balow worked his way out of bottom position to

earn a point, but Novak never let the other upperclassman bring him down to the mat. Years of state tournament and national competition experience had given him the confidence to end the match his way.

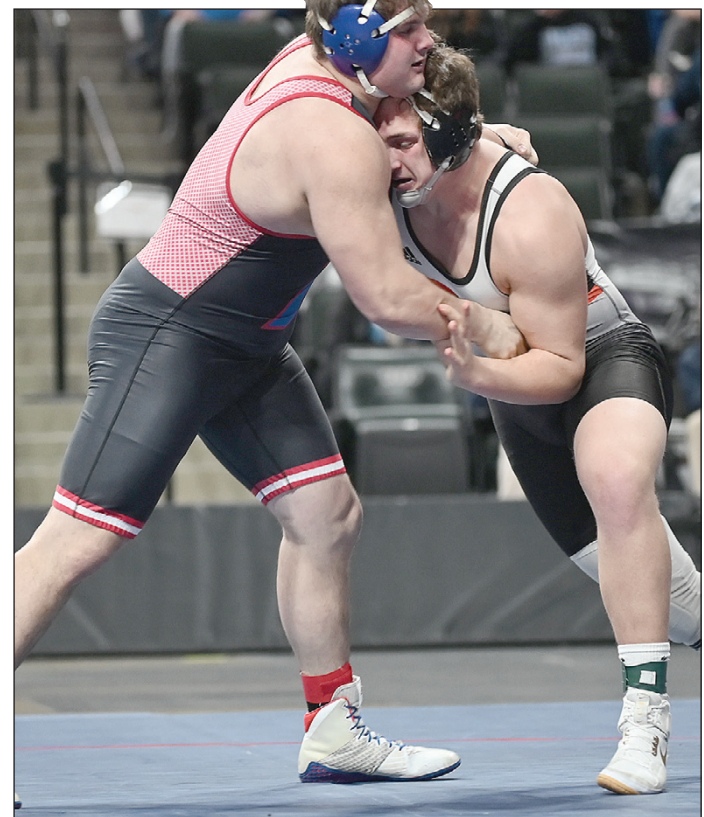
"I could stop his shot," Novak said. "That was my mentality in those last couple of seconds. I wasn't going to let him take me down."

Novak's strong technique helped him navigate a strong heavyweight class throughout the two-day state tournament. After receiving a first-round bye, he dispatched Aitkin's Craig Ashton with a win by fall in the quarterfinals before defeating Worthington's Cole Hennings in a 7-2 semifinals decision.

"We always knew he had the potential one day to be a state champion," Ratke said. "We always knew that. His work ethic, his determination, the time he puts into it and the will to not lose that was there. He was a great kid to coach."

Standing on top of the podium, Novak was hit with a wave of emotions. He had accomplished a feat he had been aiming for since his sophomore season, but he also realized his joyous career as a Falcon was also ending.

"I thank the Foley program for making me who I am today," he said. "They've changed my whole mental capabilities when trying to



Foley's Elijah Novak (left) goes for hand ties against Max Balow during the Minnesota State High School League Wrestling State Tournament Class AA heavyweight individual 285-pound championship March 5 at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. Novak controlled the match, never going to the ground in a 5-4 win.

go for goals and achievements in my life and how I overcome obstacles that are put in my way in my life."

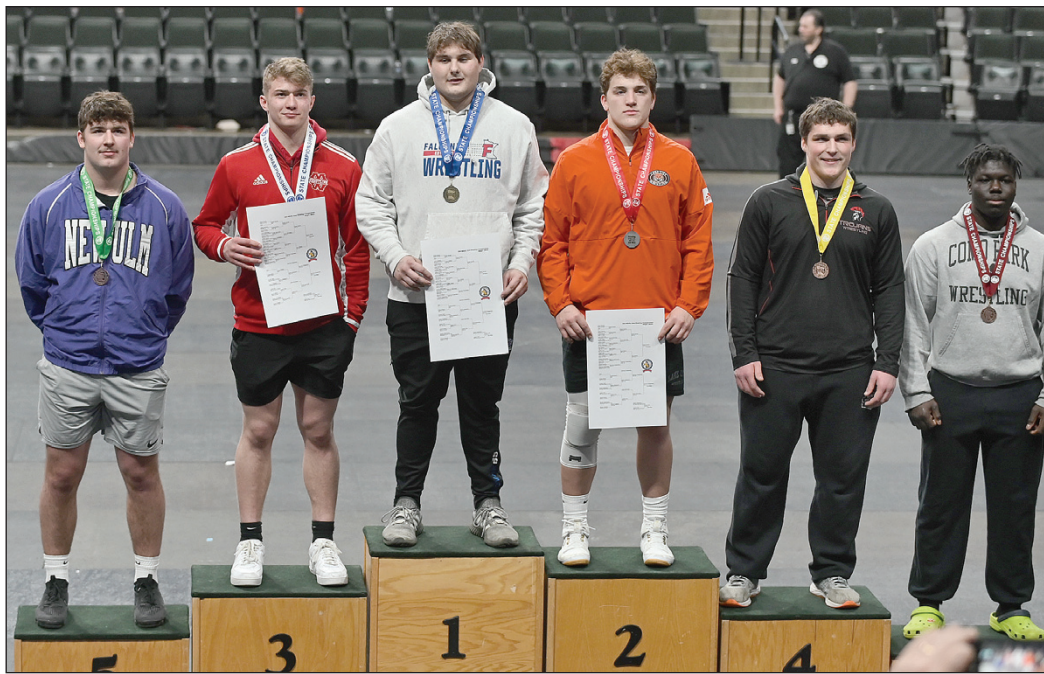
Novak was not the only Falcon the Foley community came to St. Paul to support, as 106-pound sophomore Cyler Ruhoff and 145-pound junior Cole Rudnitski also heard their names called at the statewide event. Ruhoff controlled his first-round matchup from start to finish, sending Grand Rapids' Asher Brenden to the consolation bracket with a 17-1 win by technical fall.

"I felt I was just dominant in every position and moved really well on the feet, and that led to points,"

Ruhoff said. Ruhoff's momentum, however, met a swift end with a disappointing 3-2 loss in the quarterfinals. After taking down Hutchinson/Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart's Logan Schwanz to seize a 2-1 lead in the third period, Schwanz reversed the position, ending Ruhoff's hopes of advancing.

Class AA's ninth-ranked 106-pound wrestler, Ruhoff saw his season end in consolations. He lost to Plainview-Elgin-Millville's Aiden Graner in another one-point thriller.

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Minnesota State High School League Wrestling State Tournament Class AA heavyweight individual competitors Jaden Drill, Gannon Rosenfeld, Elijah Novak, Cole Hennings and Aaron Adekplavi stand atop the podium March 5 at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. Novak, a three-time state individual participant for the Foley Falcons, achieved his longtime goal of winning the state tournament.



**OLIVIA  
NOVAK**

Parents name: Steve and Tennelle Novak

Accomplishment: Senior student council officer.



## Falcon FOCUS

**What do you like most about being involved with student council?** Being able to influence the school in positive ways. Whether it be setting up for a school dance or fundraising for a good cause, I always enjoy the feeling that what we do is leaving a positive impact and brings the school together.

**What has been your most memorable moment in student council?** When we put on the winter formal because all of the hard work we had put in paid off and everyone had a great time.

**What other activities are you involved in at FHS?** Minnesota Honor Society, Big Brother Big Sisters, conservation club and the swim team.

**What is your favorite Falcons tradition?** Definitely the new one the student council started this past year. The senior sunrise, a get-together for all of the seniors on their last first day, gives the graduating class time to catch up before the beginning of school. With games like volleyball and bean bags, as a class we had a good time. It is likely the tradition will stick around.

**What is one thing you have done in the last 24 hours to make someone's life better?** I worked with two young boys on their reading skills. I get the opportunity to do this every day when in school, and I would not trade my time with them for anything.

**What does your ideal day look like?** Waking up early and getting a good workout in, then going out for breakfast and coffee with some friends before school. I enjoy my school day so I wouldn't make any changes there, but after school, I would go to work with kids at the schools' childcare center and end the day by spending time with those that matter most. And, having most of my homework done would make my day ideal too.

**What advice have you received that has proven valuable?** Some of the best advice that I have been given has come from my family, who raised me with a strong faith. Through them, I have learned that there is no reason for me to question God's plan for me, and that no matter what, his timing is always perfect. This advice brings me significant comfort and peace, and allows me to live more freely to do what I think is right. God is good.

**Describe yourself in three words.** Driven, compassionate and optimistic.

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