

# STATE CHAMPIONS

BY JAMES STITT  
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Gymnastics can be the most pressure-packed experience for an athlete, after all they are at times jumping off a 4-inch wide beam, flipping, twisting and landing back on that narrow space. Add on the injuries that come with it and the expectations of a championship team to repeat and you've got a recipe for an extremely stressful championship meet. Luckily the Royals have a great support system that allowed them to manage the highs and lows of an imperfect year.

"There was a lot of pressure," said Ella Blinkhorn. "It was definitely a whole of season of injuries or sickness, so we were like, 'Oh gosh we have got to live up to our title now, what happens if we don't?' But the community has been very supportive, and our coaches, our parents, families and our friends. So we're definitely thankful for that and it definitely helped us throughout the season."

Entering the Class A Championship Meet, the Watertown-Mayer/Mound Westonka gymnastics team was the favorite, having been ranked No. 1 all year following their state championship win last year. But the gap was closing as Mankato West and Big Lake started to post some impressive scores as the season went along. Throw in a tough finish at the section championship a week before and a high-risk, high-reward rotation at the state meet, and the makings of an upset were there for Mankato West or Big Lake to take.



Reagan Kelley and Erin Singsank celebrate her uneven bars performance as Anna Mielke applauds her teammate. (James Stitt/The Patriot)

The Royals had to start on the balance beam, an event that Blinkhorn and Reagan Kelley were not thrilled with in their last competition.

"Both of us didn't have the greatest beam at sections, but I told Ella that this is our comeback," Kelley said.

Kelley led the way with a 9.4 on the balance beam, and though the Royals did not score as highly as they usually do, they were gritty and held on to enough points to keep them in contention.

"When they got done, I told them, 'You know girls, you could have had five fouls,' and they all just started laughing," coach Steven Hangartner said. "I said, 'We didn't have any because you just hung on.' And that adds up - if they would have fallen, that would have been 2.5 [points], but instead, maybe they only lost a point because they stayed on - all that determination."

That determination would be crucial throughout the Friday night contest, as the Royals

fell behind by two points after two events, not scoring as high as they usually do on the floor exercise. They may not have known the score, but the feeling that their championship hopes were slipping away was definitely there. That is when things started to go Watertown-Mayer/Mound Westonka's way, starting with a lineup switch that moved Blinkhorn to the final spot on the floor exercise and into the vault rotation.

"She has some of the best tumbling in the state and we also figured out the elite series she does on her floor that is worth a couple more tenths, so what I decided to do was to lead off with Maris - she's probably the cleanest and probably the best dancer," Hangartner said. "Ella, she's the only one in the state that does a 2.5, usually I don't do that, even though her average is lower . . . but she can do it, she's got the ability to come through."

And come through she did, posting the team's highest score

on floor with a 9.35. Blinkhorn was a little shocked when she heard the news that she would be moving into the fifth spot on floor, though the move paid off.

When the Royals went to vault, they finally started to deliver the high scores they are accustomed to - a 9.65 from Anna Mielke, a 9.4 from Kelley, a 9.15 from Anja Gilbert, an 8.85 from Erin Singsank and an 8.725 from Blinkhorn. Watertown-Mayer/Mound Westonka was back on track, but there was still ground to makeup.

With a break before their final event, Hangartner was sitting down worried about how the meet would play out before one of his senior leaders displayed the confidence they needed to turn the tide and repeat as state champions.

"I was hoping we were going to hold on to second . . . I was kind of in a daze - we left so many points out there," he said. "I was sitting in the back going how are we going to get out of this? [Then Anna Mielke] came and sat next to me. She came short on her vault - she kind of felt bad about that. I go, 'Are you alright?' [She said,] 'I'm just mad. I wanted to push off with my other hand but I couldn't, I was too high. I said, 'Well, Anna, we've got another event.' And she goes, 'You're darn right. We're going to get that event.' I go boy, they're not giving up, because I was kind of getting to that point where [I thought] there's no way. How are we going to catch these guys?"

The answer to Hangartner's question was someone he thought could be the difference in the state meet and two of the best uneven bars performances from the two best gymnasts in

the state.

Heading into the state tournament, the Royals finally had Erin Singsank back, who Hangartner said would provide them enough of a bumper to fend off the other teams looking to take their crown. She provided a strong vault and a much-needed 8.875 on the bars. Then came Mielke, who sent the Royals into a frenzy with a 9.625.

"Watching it, I was like, OK, they know what they're doing," Blinkhorn said. "I was like, we can really do good here. No matter what happens, I'll be proud them."

Kelley then fanned the flames that Mielke sparked, posting a 9.675 that had the Royals celebrating like they won a state championship, though they had no idea how true that was.

The Royals needed to get a 36.200 on bars to tie Mankato West for first place, the exact same score they got at the Section 5A Championship, and also their highest mark of the season. They got a 36.375.

"I'm just in shock, it's unbelievable, I'm just very grateful to be here in the first place, but to win it again, I'm just shocked," said Blinkhorn. "We really pulled ourselves together mentally and that's what I'm so proud of. We worked so hard and I'm very glad that on bars we were able to put it all in the past and just go out and do what we do in the gym."

Their final team score was 145.750, not their best of the year, but it was enough for them to eek out a second consecutive Class A State Championship, a score just 0.150 points better than Mankato West.

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<b>Central Public Schools Weekly Sports Schedule</b>	
Day/Date	
Thursday, Feb. 24	Basketball Boys 7:15 pm vs. St. Clair @ Saint Clair High School  Basketball Girls: 7:30 pm vs. Southwest Christian @ Norwood-Young America High School HS Gym
Friday, Feb. 25	Basketball Boys Varsity 7:30 pm vs. GFW @ Norwood Young America High School HS Gym
Saturday, Feb. 26	Speech Varsity Meet, 8:30 am vs. Maple Lake @ Maple Lake High School
Monday, Feb. 28	Basketball: Boys Varsity 7:15 pm, vs. Tri-City United @ Tri-City United High School High School Gym