

Al Thomas slipped off the straps of his singlet and let his top fall down around his waist.

With a wide smile on his face, he started flexing his chest.

"Take a picture of me like Rodney," Thomas said in reference to the posed shot of former Bamberg-Ehrhardt wrestling star and current UFC fighter Rodney Wallace that first ran in The Times and Democrat.

Rodney this. Rodney that. It was evident that for Thomas, one of just five seniors on the B-E wrestling team, that Wallace's visit just over a month ago to be inducted into the Red Raiders' Wrestling Hall of Fame had an impact. But, for all the admiration Thomas has for his idol, there was one thing he talked about more Thursday evening.

Snow or no snow, Thomas and his B-E wrestling teammates are scheduled to trek to Chesterfield to take on powerhouse Chesterfield High School at 2 p.m. for the Class A state title.

"Man, I'm ready to get it started," Thomas said. "I had a dream that one of our seniors pinned one of their state champions, and it has just been on my mind since we beat Academic Magnet at Lower State."

No disrespect from Thomas. For dream to become reality, he said, the Red Raiders will have to come at Chesterfield with their best shot.

"We have to go out there and execute," he said. "We all have to wrestle the best we can. If everybody wrestles their best ... then we have a shot. But, I do think it will be hard to do."

Hard might be putting it lightly. It could be downright near impossible. Chesterfield will enter Saturday's state finals with the active record for most duals' playoffs wins with 13. The Rams are deep. The Rams are experienced. The Rams don't lose.

"We have talked about all of that," second-year Red Raiders' head coach Cody Slaughter said. "I think the kids understand it won't be easy."

But, just because they understand the climb to the top won't be easy, doesn't mean the B-E wrestlers don't believe they can do it.

"I really think the kids' confidence this year has been the difference," Slaughter said. "That's something they didn't have in the past, and I think that will help us out a little bit as far as staying close with them, fighting not to give up point where we might have given them up in the past. Our guys really want it, and that will be one of the weapons we have ... our desire to win."

The blueprint for victory sounds simple. According to Slaughter, B-E just has to weather the storm that is the Chesterfield lineup between 112-160 pounds. Easier said than done.

"If you can get through there and pick up a few wins, you have a chance to beat them," he said. "But ... those wins come few and far between."

And, the Red Raiders' tasked with having to fend off the Rams through that run are mostly underclassmen, freshmen and sophomores. That group is led by 119-pound freshman Landis Hiers, who sports a 53-7 record this season.

"I'm from Bamberg," Slaughter said. "I've known (Hiers) since he was an ankle-biter. He came through our youth program, worked his way through middle school and won the middle school state championship last year at 110."

“He has been **wrestling** for seven years now, and having him at the lighter weights has boosted our team. We’re almost guaranteed a win every time he goes out there.”

Except this time. Hiers is ranked third in the state by scmat.com. His opponent figures to be junior Tyler Alley, ranked second in the state by scmat.com. **B-E** will also be counting on sophomore Lane Walling, ranked seventh in the state at 125, who will likely face Matt Moore, eighth in the state, and freshman Player Long, fourth in the state at 135.

“We are pretty freshman heavy where they are experienced,” Slaughter said. “I think the lack of experience in that range is going to be ridiculous. All those freshman **wrestling** seniors ... it is really scary. It really is.”

It won’t all be up to the young guys. Thomas, ranked third at 171, and fellow senior, team captain and North-South All-Star John Hammett, ranked sixth at 189, will be counted on as well.

“(John) is absolutely a great kid,” Slaughter said. “He is going to do some great things this year. The 189 class is not a very stacked weight class this year. We think John has a great chance at winning it this year.”

Nothing is given. Nothing is easy. But, Bamberg-Ehrhardt has wrestled Chesterfield already this season. The Rams won that one 42-27.

“We were at least competitive,” Slaughter said. “Our guys are really excited about this weekend. I think that is a big part of taking the next step and getting closer to them.”

Closer would be nice. A win would be special.

“We’ve got five seniors in the lineup,” Slaughter said. “The rest are ninth and 10th graders. I mean, looking at it, if we win, and that is a big statement to make, but if it happens that is our first state championship in **wrestling** for Bamberg. It will definitely be the biggest school win in the history of the program.”

And, it will also prove that, sometimes, dreams come true.

“Four years **wrestling** the same team,” Thomas said. “Four years with the same outcome for three years. To finally (beat Chesterfield) my senior year ... that would mean a lot to us.”