

4 FOR 4

M. Murray

One of the most elusive and monumental achievements in a wrestling career is winning a state title every year you are in school. Some states offer younger aged wrestlers to compete at a varsity level earlier so by those standards in some states around the country you have wrestlers that have actually won more than four state titles. Never the less, to be the best every year is an amazing feat. For most wrestlers, the goal of becoming a 4-time state champ ends in their first season. Some dreams are broken in later years. A 4-time state champion has only happened 20 times in the history of South Carolina wrestling. Chandler Smalley of Abbeville High School was the last to do it (2016-2019) and Carl Van Sewell of Airport High School was the first (1975-1978). If my research is correct, this year South Carolina will offer up 4 contenders vying for their fourth state title.

Jackson Stembridge 1A/2A Bamberg-Ehrhardt

Jackson took his first title at 106 pounds (which is the theme with this group) and has moved up a weight class or two each year. It is safe to say that we will probably find him atop the rankings at 132 when they come out in mid-January. Jackson has tallied six falls, a major and two decisions in his three trips to Anderson. His closest match was in the semi-finals of the 2020 tournament where he won 4-0 over Chad Rowlette of High Point Academy. Rowlette returns this season and might be the biggest hurdle to overcome in order to solidify his fourth state title. I do not know of any other match ups between the two, other than a 12-0 victory Stembridge had over Rowlette in the first round of the 2018 state finals. Don't count out Logan Kinard of Timberland as well. With such a crazy off season, he may have found a way to close the gap on Stembridge. I am sure there is someone else out there just waiting for a shot at the champ. Keep an eye on these guys this season. Jackson Stembridge also has the chance to become only the fifth wrestler in South Carolina history to win 4 individual state titles and 4 team state titles.

Kalab Haven 1A/2A North Central

Unlike the others, Kalab began his run at 4 state titles at another school and unlike the others, his first title came at the 160 pound weight class. Haven's first state title came as a Volunteer of Andrew Jackson. After that freshman year Haven has won two titles for the Knights of North Central. All titles have begun with round one falls. He likes to get off to a good start! However, the semi-finals were close in his freshman and sophomore campaign. Kalab has solidified himself atop the mountain in the 1A/2A division. Elijah Mervin of Columbia High School will have another crack at Haven. Addison Nickles of Abbeville High School is another one to watch out for but what I selfishly want to see is

Zane Van Vleet (returning state champ at 170) from High Point Academy move up to 182 and Haven stay at 182? I love to see the best seek out the best for competition! It is still way too early to see what weight everyone will go and I am sure Kalab has grown but, I do hope it happens!

Kaleem Heard 4A York Comprehensive

Kaleem, like Stembridge and the upcoming Compton, took home his first title at 106 pounds. Heard has moved up weight classes each year. He jumped to 126 in the 2019-2020 season because fellow Cougar and multi state champ Luke Rumpfelt took the spot at 120. So...who grew, who didn't, who knows? I would not be surprised to see him at 126 again or up at 132. Either way, much like Stembridge, Heard dominates in Anderson boasting eight, bonus point matches out of his nine total. This is where we see the realignment create drama for us! Also returning and moving up this year is the 3A state champ, from Indian Land, Dylan Layton. The potential for these guys to meet up starts conversations like the ones that surround the Hunsberger vs. Wilkins matches last year! The best part is, Indian Land and York are in the same region, so if it happens, we may see it much sooner than the state finals! Speed and relentless attacks are what I look forward to seeing in this match. I hope we get it...even if it is just for the region dual.

Chris Compton 5A J.F. Byrnes

Compton, fresh off his Carolina Open 86 pound title as an 8th grader in the Middle School division grinded his way to his first state title (106 pounds) over future state champ Chandler Amaker of Fort Dorchester. Compton has been able to keep himself light for the past three years but I still see him at 120 or maybe even 126 this year. Compton, historically, has not put up big numbers at the state tournament but do not let that fool you. He methodically controls his matches and is trending towards the type of dominance we see out of a potential four-time state champ. He scored bonus points in all three matches at the 2020 state finals. Does he have an easy ride to a fourth title? Remember, 5A graduated a lot but depending on the way weights shake out somebody like Snipes of Hillcrest or Colon of Fort Mill could possibly be road blocks. In March we may have the first four-time 5A state champ?

And just to add I pinch more drama to all of this...the most 4-time state champs South Carolina has had in one season is three. Spanning the 2005-2008 seasons Corbin Martin of Eastside, Jonathan Willard of Loris and Dalton Harper of Chesterfield locked in their 4th state title. Can these young men go 4 for 4 in 2021?