

Best in Class B: Swedes end season by capturing state crown

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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When members of the Swede speech team held high the Class B state champion trophy last Thursday, it was much more than they imagined.

“It was awesome,” said Coltin Bebensee who participated in an oral interpretation of drama team that finished ninth.

Josh Clark, who placed third in duet acting along with Zac Franzen, said the win made him feel like the Swedes hadn’t wasted any moments during the regular season.

“It seemed all worth it in the end,” Clark said.

To Elisa Meridith, a state champion in poetry and second to teammate Franzen in serious prose, the outcome felt much better than in 2009 when the Swedes finished seventh.

Franzen was part of the team that won state in Class B in 2008. He brought home double golds from state last year in humorous and entertainment speaking.

His winning entry this year took audiences and judges into an online chat room where he invented a “dirty blonde, green-eyed girl” who entices a young boy.

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“This win was nicer because I didn’t have anyone to celebrate with last year—I was the only one who medaled,” Franzen said. “I got to share it all of the other medalists.”

The Swedes entered state competition with 11 entries compared to about 15 schools that qualified in four to nine events that had done well in past years, according to speech adviser Dan Jensen.

“I felt our kids had the potential to do it,” he said. “Even though we had good prospects, I just never rest easy until the job is done.”

That’s because during one bad round, a quirky judge or an over-confident team can change the outcome, Jensen said.

Going into finals, he said the Swedes narrowed the field as students were in six events compared to Minden, 5; Milford, Norris and Cozad, 4; and Alliance, Aurora and Gering, 3.

“Had we placed in the bottom half of finals, any one of those teams could have knocked us off,” he explained.

What it took in the end, Jensen said, was for all six events to generally place in the top half to stay ahead.

“That was the difference maker,” he said.

Once the point totals were announced and the Swedes finished on top, Jensen said he felt a tremendous sense of pride.

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“These kids have gotten a lot of people to take notice with recent success toward the end of the season,” Jensen said. “But with that attention comes the pressure to continue.”

The Swedes know pressure that can sometimes affect expectations.

Meridith said her expectations were too high at state last year and she didn’t break finals.

“Now I have lower expectations because anything can happen,” she said.

Her prize-winning performance included selections from three different poems about “Living On the Edge.”

Franzen, a senior who qualified for state four years in a row, said “pumping each other up” before entering the performance room is helpful.

“When we walk into the room we know we’re the best and we’re going to give the best speech we’ve given so far,” he said.

For Block, preparation helped him pull off a second-place win.

Extemporaneous speakers in the final round had to decide whether or not Al-Quaida was more powerful this year than in 2009.

“In extemporaneous more than any other event it’s what you put into it outside of practice and school in keeping up on current events,” he explained.

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Costello said he calmed his nerves before giving an informative speech about Nebraska's scrap metal drive during World War II.

"I treated it like another meet and went in feeling relaxed and confident," he said, noting that nervousness at the district meet prevented him from breaking into finals in persuasive speaking.

During the regular season, the Swedes built up momentum, winning Southwest Conference and districts where they defeated speech powerhouse Minden twice.

"Minden is a strong team that had a good reason to bring it on at state," Jensen said.

In addition to this year and 2008, the Swedes were state C-1 champions in 2004 and runners-up in 2005 while Jensen has coached the team.

Time, energy and a commitment to make the team a priority are what it takes to coach a speech team to a state championship, he said.

"Sometimes I'd like to think that I have a life outside of speech but from January through March, I really don't," Jensen said.

But Jensen doesn't want the spotlight.

"This is a lot bigger than one coach, one great student or even one team," he explained. "These students have the foundation of a strong tradition to live up to and they take that very seriously."

Both little and big things from parents, school and the community also help make a winning team, Jensen said.

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In addition to those ingredients, he said Gothenburg High School has students who desire to be the best, noting that speech students constantly measure themselves against the best competitors and best programs.

“We learn from them and stay current with the techniques that will become trends,” he said. “We study ballots and take judges’ comments seriously—changing and improving from week to week.”

Ashlee Bruntz finished outside of the medals with eighth place in humorous speaking while teammate Lauren Schmiett placed 10th in entertainment speaking.

Two oral interpretation of drama teams qualified for state.

The team of Bebensee, Block, Elizabeth Graham, Leah Loostrom and Alex Spencer finished ninth while Kristi Block, Mackenzie Brand, Makayla Franzen, Crystal Moore and Schmiett were 17th.

Twelve speech students head to Cheyenne, WY, Thursday through Saturday for the National Forensic League qualifying speech meet.

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