MANTUA, OHIO—MATCH 393

One would think 393 was just another of the over 1,000 matches wrestled in the 2010 OHSAA state wrestling championships. Not the case. This one was historical, as it marked the first time in the 79-year history of the tournament that a female won a match.

Huron County fans were in the midst of watching Monroeville’s Fab Four making their equally historic runs. Logan Stieber won his fourth state championship, while his brother, Hunter, Cam Tessari and Chris Phillips picked up their third titles as the Eagles won the Division III state team title.

With just one loss between the four of them, they were expected to win. Not necessarily the case with the first female to walk on a state tournament mat.

Her name, Paige Nemec.

Few gave this 103-pound girl a chance against the best Div. II opponents.

However, if you lived in and around the small Ohio community of Mantua, you had hope.

After all, her career numbers were 23-9 as a freshman, 26-8 as a sophomore, 32-8 as a junior and 33-9 going into the state tournament. Her mat statistics were equally impressive: 192 career takedowns, 49 pins, 20 tournament placements — including tournament wins at Aurora where she was the MVP, at Chippewa, at Manchester and at the sectional two weeks prior. But, this was the pressure of Columbus against the best 31 in the state.

Nemec fans turned out in force to see if she was as good as they believed.

She drew a district champion in her first match, and not all that unexpected, lost 8-0 to Trevor Fiorucci, a 40-match winner.

What happened four hours later in the consolation round was what her fans had hoped for. She was flawless in her 3-0 decision over Wapakoneta freshman John Martin (26-11). Her chance of pulling off the unthinkable, standing on the podium of a male-dominated sport, would not be reached, however, when she lost her next match, 3-1, to Sean Fee (33–10) from Mentor Lake Catholic.
Her coach in 2010, Dave Wrobel, remains the coach at Mantua Crestwood. It is safe to say he remembers every match Paige Nemec wrestled. He certainly remembered her march to the state tournament her senior year.

“I have never coached an athlete more driven than Paige Nemec,” Wrobel said. “She put in the time both in season and out. Because she was not as muscular as her male counterparts, she had to spend more time than her teammates in the weight room. Even more important, her technique had to be spot on. She never quit working on that refinement.”

Wrobel said when Nemec was eliminated in the districts as a junior, she was already in the weight room the following Monday.

“She never quit working, becoming stronger on her feet while at the same time working hard at getting better at working in the top position,” he said. “Paige had escape moves that I absolutely marveled at. There was not a weak link in her arsenal.

“Although many who followed the sport were in her corner, there were others who felt a female had no place on a wrestling mat,” Wrobel added. “Paige stayed focused despite hearing some of the comments. And there were times when coaches and wrestlers found excuses not to take the mat against her. It was their choice. For certain, she never refused to take the mat.”

Wrobel also added there was only a couple of times where Nemec let her emotions show.

“And those moments only lasted for a minute or two,” he said. “She lost matches, but she walked off believing she learned from the defeat. She was like a sponge in that regard. Seldom would she get caught in the same move a second time.

“In fact, she became even more willing to try that move if the opportunity arose,” Wrobel added. “In the end, what she did in Columbus not only made Ohio wrestling history, but it was also a tremendous personal accomplishment.”

Nemec is now 26 years old and working as a scientist at Precision Biosciences in Durham, North Carolina. Last year, she graduated with a PhD in Immunology from North Carolina State University. She fondly remembers her high school days and historic Ohio wrestling career at Mantua Crestwood.

“Memorable both athletically and academically,” Nemec said. “I had great mentors both in the classroom and in wrestling and soccer. People ask me why I chose wrestling. The obvious answer is my dad wrestled and he followed my cousins, who wrestled at Lakewood St. Edward. With all that wrestling talk around me, I became interested. Dad told me if I wanted to try it, I could start at age five.

“My mom (Geri) was also fine with it,” she added. “As it turned out, both my younger brother (Conner) and sister (Sydney) also wrestled. Conner placed at the state twice, and Sydney won the state girls tournament, but had her career shortened when she broke her collarbone.”

Nemec credits her father, Gary, and head coach Dave Wrobel as being the two people who had the most to do with her wrestling success.

“My dad was especially tough on me, but it was to my benefit,” she said. “I got pushed hard by a lot of people, but when I won
the Aurora tournament and was named MVP as a sophomore — I knew all I had to do was listen and learn and I would get better and better.”

It is her belief that wrestling has taught her life-skills such as discipline, work ethics, sacrifice and the ability to stay focused. Nemec was also a fine soccer player both in high school on club teams, and eventually in college. Her Northeast Ohio club team coach was Bob Dean, now the athletic director at Crestwood.

“She could have named her sport, soccer or wrestling, as far as a college career,” Dean said. “I never coached an athlete that was so intent on improving her skill level.”

Nemec was the MVP of the Crestwood soccer teams as a sophomore, junior and senior as well as earning all-district honors. Although she had scholarship offers in wrestling from Cumberland College and Oklahoma City — as well as playing free gratis for the Sun Kist Kids team at the Olympic Village in Colorado Springs — she decided she was tired of cutting weight and was getting burnt out from wrestling.

“I did not want to move that far away, so I decided on accepting a soccer scholarship at nearby Lake Erie College in Painesville,” said Nemec, who played soccer at LEC all four years and graduated with a degree in chemistry before moving onto N.C. State for graduate school. “My teachers and coaches at all levels were so critical in my attaining career goals.”

More than 200 girls around Ohio participated in wrestling during the 2018–19 season and that number continues to grow. Last year, the second girl in OHSAA history qualified for the state tournament, as Olivia Shore from Miami East qualified and became the first girl to win an opening-round match.

As more girls wrestle, may they know the name of the one who blazed the first road to the state tournament:

**PAIGE NEMEC**