

SPORTS

Talent-stocked Willard wrestling aims high

Tigers return several state medalists, including runners-up Talbot and Griffin



by Mary Ellen Chiles

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Willard head coach Jeff Davis has worked with high school wrestlers for more than 25 years, including stints at Bolivar, Waynesville and Park Hill in Kansas City.

Davis has plenty of proven grapplers on his current Tigers roster.

Willard features multiple athletes who've earned top-three finishes at the state wrestling tournament during their decorated careers and are looking to get back on the podium in February.





Porter Talbot (left) and Brady Griffin were both named All-Americans this summer after finishing in the top 8 in their weight classes at a national tournament in Florida. (Courtesy photo)

Porter Talbot, junior, 215

Porter Talbot placed second at state at 215 pounds the past two seasons though he's relatively new to the sport. He started wrestling at the club level in his early teens and soon found himself at an impasse: He wanted to compete in high school, but he was homeschooled.

So, he started high school at Willard. He's adjusted just fine and, not surprisingly, enjoys the self-reliance of his sport.

"It's all on you, so you don't have to rely on anyone," Talbot said. "The work you put in directly reflects on the mat."

Talbot is also a member of the Missouri National Team, which features many of the best wrestlers in the state. The top 8 finishers in each weight class at the national tournament are named All-Americans, which he was this past summer.

"I like that it's not easy," Talbot said.

He's interested in becoming a veterinarian and would love to compete at Mizzou.

"The state championship? He's gonna have a really good shot to pull it off," Davis said.

Brady Griffin, senior, 285

Brady Griffin hopes to win state at 285 pounds after placing the past three years, including runner-up as a junior.

Like Talbot, he earned All-American honors. Griffin first got into wrestling because his best friend's dad coached, and he picked it up in elementary school.

Griffin echoed Talbot in his appreciation for the sport.

"I like that it's a tough sport, and not everybody does it," Griffin said.

He seems to enjoy challenging himself. Griffin competed at 195 as a freshman, but realized he needed to gain weight to wrestle collegiately.

"Sophomore year, I made the jump, and I was, like, 230 pounds wrestling 285," he said. "That was pretty difficult."

A lot of chicken and rice, he said. A lot.

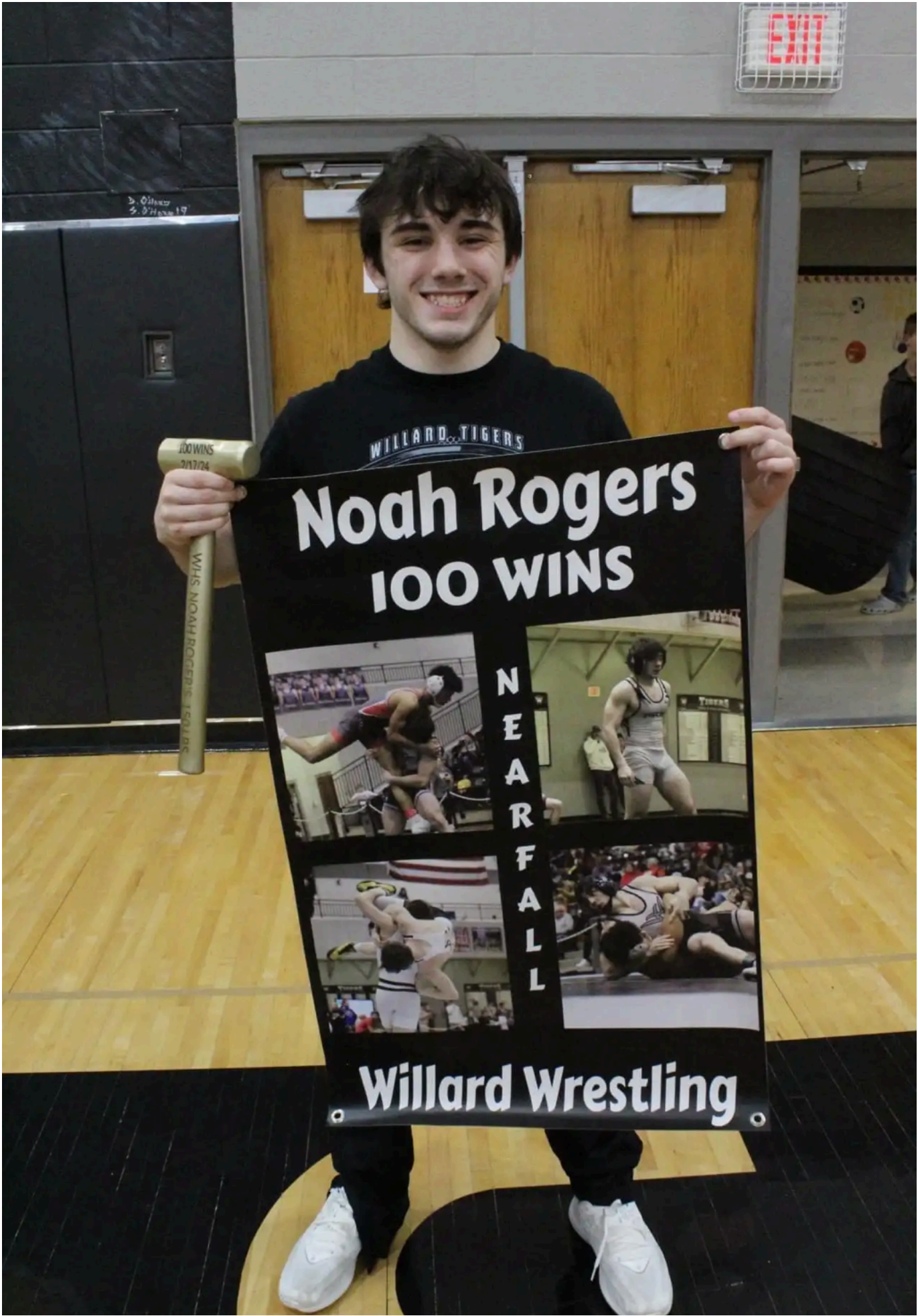
Griffin broke his leg playing baseball before high school, which has motivated him to consider pre-med while wrestling collegiately. He wants to become an orthopedic surgeon but quotes a wrestler for inspiration.

“I think Dan Gable said, ‘Once you wrestle, everything else is easy,’” Griffin said.

Davis has high hopes for Griffin, who placed fifth at state his first two years, despite an illness as a sophomore.

“He played football over that past couple years and this year he wanted to wrestle and focus on that and stay healthy,” Davis said. “He’s a great kid.”

Noah Rogers, senior, 150



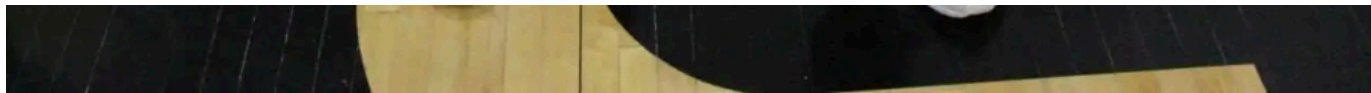
WILLARD TIGERS

Noah Rogers 100 WINS



NEAR
FALL

Willard Wrestling



Noah Rogers may wrestle in college after this year, but only if the school offers zoology. He wants to work with wildlife in the field. (Courtesy photo)

Noah Rogers has qualified for state every year in high school, placing third as a junior.

He likes wrestling because it's different. He grew up playing baseball and basketball, so he appreciates the team aspect. But competing solo is less stressful.

"I always kind of struggled with letting the team down, like my performance affecting the rest of the team," Rogers said. "And I feel like wrestling really helped me a lot, because if I mess up, it's on me."

Rogers has wrestled for nine years, but he's not sure about wrestling collegiately.

"I'm still kind of undecided, because I want to go into zoology, and not a lot of colleges offer that," he said.

He's interested in working with wildlife in the field, and he may have the perfect fit out west.

"Oregon State is one big one I'm looking at, and they have wrestling," Rogers said.

Davis believes Rogers will succeed wherever he goes.

"He's probably the hardest worker in the room," Davis said. "He's gonna work his tail off in the classroom and he makes good decisions."

Caleb Caldwell, senior, 144

Caleb Caldwell started wrestling when he was 4, following in the footsteps of older brothers who competed at Willard.

Perhaps it's not a surprise that Caldwell said he likes wrestling because it toughened him up. But it's not so much about handling siblings as it is for handling everything else. He feels like training and competing set him up to succeed.

"I know – if I put what I put into wrestling – I can put that into whatever I do in life and be good at it," Caldwell said.

He's certainly learned proper manners, using "ma'am" and "sir" like it's going out of style, which it sort of has. Coach Davis insists on respectful athletes.

"Every one of my kids, when they're going home, they're gonna be saying, 'Yes, sir; No, sir,'" Davis said. "They're great kids, and they're a little crazy because they wrestle, but I like that."

After a second-place state finish as a sophomore, Caldwell was primed to do one better last season. But a high ankle sprain during the postseason knocked him off the podium and he lost a bubble match, just missing a medal.

He hopes to wrestle in college, and he's open to pretty much any major, he said, with one exception.

"Not medicine, because I can't stand blood," he said.



Mary Ellen Chiles

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More by Mary Ellen Chiles

