

Cubs seeking return to state finals

Wrestling sectional full of talent

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Going to the team state finals would be nice. But Mike Reese has a far loftier ambition for the Franklin Community High School wrestling team.

If the Grizzly Cubs end a three-year drought and return to the championships, Reese sees no reason why they can't go ahead and win it.

"We could take it all the way, I think, if we work hard," said Reese, one of three undefeated wrestlers for sixth-ranked Franklin. "We're capable of going and winning state, I believe."

"That's the ultimate goal."

But first things first.

Franklin's postseason march begins Saturday at the Mooresville Sectional, a critical first step in its attempt to return to the IHSAA team finals for the first time since 2002.

Coach Bob Hasseman said he believes the Cubs' sectional performance — good, bad or otherwise — will set the tone for the postseason.

Not surprisingly, he's banking on a productive day in an eight-team field that also includes county rivals Center Grove, Greenwood, Indian Creek and Whiteland.

"You've got to take this thing one step at a time, and sectionals, to me, is the most important match of the year," Hasseman



Franklin Community High School senior Brad Gallagher wrestles with teammate Brandon Pettijohn during practice at the school Wednesday. The Grizzly Cubs will compete in the Mooresville Sectional on Saturday.

said. "We don't want to look down the road, or you won't be going down the road, which has been the case with this group of seniors."

"I haven't been to state since they came in as freshmen, and so I think that they would like to finish strong."

Reaffirming their 15-year reputation as one of the state's top programs is unquestionably the Cubs' priority.

Franklin competed in the first seven-team state finals but hasn't participated since 2002. Getting

back is the primary objective, especially for a determined senior class that's never been to the finals.

"I don't know about the underclassmen, but as seniors, we're headed for it," said Brad Gallagher, who is 30-0 at 119 pounds. "We're gunning for it."

"We hope to get back there, and we'll do anything we can to get back there."

Franklin, which is bidding for an 11th straight team sectional title, appears to have the talent

and momentum to do it.

Formidable in every weight class, the Cubs are 23-1 and are coming off a team victory at the Mid-State Conference Tournament. Their only loss was by two points early in the season against No. 4 Mishawaka.

Franklin has been on a roll ever since and features unbeaten wrestlers in Reese, Gallagher and senior Cody Johnson.

Reese is 29-0 at 160 pounds. He's also ranked No. 4 in the state. Johnson is 31-0 at 215 pounds, is battling injuries to

• Kings

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Think about it. If you're the Kings or any franchise with a goal of winning, why do you want Artest?

His past speaks for itself. It's littered with repeat failures, broken vows of redemption and perpetual betrayal. He's thoroughly embarrassed anyone and everyone who's supported him and defended him against the indefensible.

That would include Larry Bird and Donnie Walsh. It would include every Indiana Pacer. And it would include a compassionate city that still embraced him after the brawl (which he ignited, by the way).

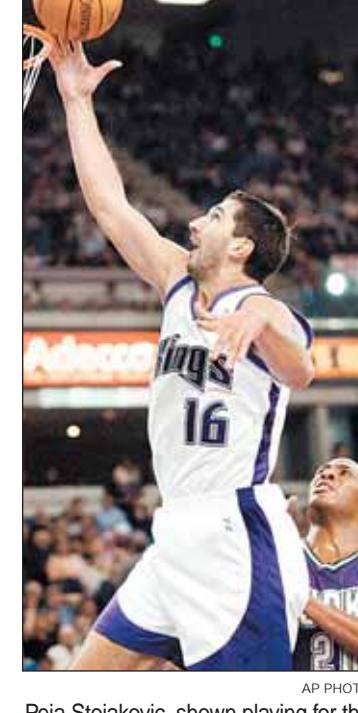
Again, let's say a heartfelt "Thank you" to Sacramento. Because if a sucker weren't born every minute, who knows where we'd be at the All-Star break?

None of it did.

Artest did wreck another season, only this time the problem might be correctable before time's up.

Peja Stojakovic might not be the fix, but he's a start in the right direction. The Pacers, after all, could have done a lot worse than acquire one of the NBA's best shooters, a three-time All-Star who's only 28, for a 26-year-old loon whose name is synonymous with destruction.

Stojakovic can't hurt. The least



Peja Stojakovic, shown playing for the Sacramento Kings in a Nov. 18 game against the Bucks, is expected to join the Indiana Pacers soon after being traded for Ron Artest on Wednesday.

he can do is help.

Best of all, the Pacers can no longer use Artest as an excuse for anything.

Yes, he was a distraction. The worst possible. But he's gone, and he's not coming back.

Lethargic performances? Not Artest's fault. Lopsided losses? Not Artest's fault. Uninspired effort? Not Artest's fault.

Everything from this point forward, good, bad or otherwise, is the Pacers' fault. This is a fresh start. Late in the game, to be sure. But not too late to salvage something.

Again, let's say a heartfelt "Thank you" to Sacramento. Because if a sucker weren't born every minute, who knows where we'd be at the All-Star break?

Probably stuck with Artest, with no better offer on the table than Brian Scalabrine and a CBA player to-be-named later. You know, pretty much what the Pacers got for Brad Miller, which was nothing, depending on your definition of Scot Pollard.

Without question, Walsh and Bird are responsible not only for the mess Artest created, but for the one he leaves behind. But remember, also, that Walsh's long-term track record is otherwise sterling. The franchise is indebted to his wisdom. The Pacers can recover.

Everyone makes mistakes. This was a huge and protracted one. Let's just hope the Pacers learn from it.

Let the healing begin.

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BASKETBALL

NEW YORK

Knicks' Thomas unhappy with harassment lawsuit

Isiah Thomas reacted with indignation Wednesday over a former team executive's federal sexual harassment lawsuit, which accuses the New York Knicks president of unwanted advances, discrimination and demeaning and repulsive behavior.



THOMAS

Thomas said he never harassed Anucha Browne Sanders, the Knicks' former senior vice president of marketing and business operations, nor did he discriminate against her or participate in her firing.

"She did not even work for me," he said, reading from a written statement at a news conference Wednesday. "I will not allow her or anybody, man or woman, to use me as a pawn for their financial gain."

Thomas said he spoke out despite his lawyers' advice to keep mum because "it is not their name; it's not their family; it's not their career; and it's not their reputation that's being hurt."

Browne Sanders said she sued Thomas and Madison Square Garden "because I had no choice."

"My pleas and complaints about Mr. Thomas's illegal and offensive actions fell on deaf ears," she said.

BASEBALL

OAKLAND, Calif.

A's acquire Thomas to upgrade their offense

Frank Thomas called Oakland general manager Billy Beane to reiterate how thrilled he would be to join the Athletics.

The two clicked at last month's winter meetings, and it led to a contract for the free agent slugger.

Thomas agreed to a \$500,000, one-year deal with Oakland on Wednesday, giving the A's the big right-handed bat they've been searching for in the middle of their lineup. He will be formally introduced today.

"Frank Thomas is a presence," Beane said. "Not only would he be our type of offensive player, he would be everybody's type of offensive player. ... If Frank is healthy, he's been good against everybody."

Thomas, a two-time American League MVP who has been slowed by injuries in recent years, can make an additional \$2.6 million in bonuses based on plate appearances and not hurting his left foot. He played his first 16 seasons with the Chicago White Sox.

• Pacers

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"We're gamblers. So we're going to take a chance on him."

Gavin Maloof
Sacramento Kings co-owner
on acquisition of Ron Artest

problem. Not so fast. Artest reportedly balked at playing in Sacramento, delaying the deal.

But the Kings owners were more interested in Artest's skills than his sideshows, which will return to Indy when the Kings visit March 17.

"We're gamblers. So we're going to take a chance on him," said Kings co-owner Gavin Maloof, who also owns a casino with his brother Joe. "We want to look forward; otherwise we wouldn't have made this happen."

The Kings are in last place in the Pacific Division.

Artest apparently changed his mind about the Kings after meeting with Pacers CEO Donnie Walsh earlier Wednesday after again expressing interest in returning to Indiana.

At the meeting, Walsh said Artest never complained to him about going to Sacramento. Instead, Walsh explained that Sacramento may be a good place for Artest to get a fresh start.

He acknowledged the persistent trade rumors took a toll on an Indiana team expected to contend for an NBA title. Indiana was 10-6 with Artest but had gone

go there; in fact he said the opposite was true," Walsh said. "He said he wanted go there and win games."

In exchange, the Pacers may have gotten the outside shooter they need to replace the retired Reggie Miller.

Stojakovic, a three-time all-star, was averaging 16.5 points in 31 games for the Kings this season despite playing with a bad back and having his worst NBA season.

Stojakovic has averaged 18.5 points in his career, shooting 46.5 percent from the field and 39.8 percent from 3-point range.

Now that Artest is gone, Bird hopes the Pacers can again focus on basketball.

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• Mark

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Price scored six points in the first three minutes of the third quarter as Center Grove went on a 14-4 run to build a 51-38 lead.

Less than two minutes later, junior Tyler Kitchel and sophomore Corey Gray hit back-to-back 3-pointers to give the Trojans a 62-45 lead with 3:13 to play in the quarter.

"The way Todd is around the rim, once he gets two or three layups, the Hawks have to adjust by double-teaming him," Kitchel

said. "And that opens the outside up for Gray and me."

Decatur Central (7-5) pulled within 12 early in the fourth quarter. But Center Grove made 9 of 11 shots in the final period, outscoring the Hawks 31-23.

Kitchel had a game-high 28 points on 10-of-17 shooting. Gray was 6 of 8 from the field for 18 points.

"We thought we could wear (the Hawks) down if we got the whole team involved," Hawkins said.

"We won in toughness, energy and rebounding, categories we wanted to win coming into the game."

"We are very satisfied with the win, but we will continue to work."

Ronnie didn't say he wouldn't

both legs. And senior Brandon Justice, another top performer, is out with a shoulder injury.

"We can honestly classify this month as our series of unfortunate events," said Thompson, whose team was runner-up at last year's sectional. "We're putting a lot of JV kids on the mat right now."

"We'll see how it goes, but we're going to show up and do the best we can with what we've got."

Fortunately for the Warriors, juniors Matt Fields and Anthony Meister, two of the state's top wrestlers, are healthy. Fields is ranked No. 6 at 112 pounds; Meister is 17th at 125.

Thompson isn't sure how many of Whiteland's other regulars will be ready to go by Saturday, but he does offer one guarantee.

"We fully intend to compete for the championship with the team we put on the mat," he said.

"We'll compete with whatever we have, because we have some pretty good (JV wrestlers), too."

"We have good kids, and we have good kids working hard. And as long as you have that, you always have a chance."

Hasseman applauds the strength of the tournament field and asserts that most, if not every, team has at least one individual capable of winning a championship.

But if everything falls into place, Hasseman is confident the Cubs can collect a sizable share of titles.

Above all, he wants to take a bold first step in a postseason journey that has ended at the semistate the past three years.

"I think we're talented," Hasseman said. "If we bring our 'A' game ... I've seen the 'A' game this year, but I haven't seen it all the time. If we bring the 'A' game, and we're on mentally, I think we're pretty good."

"The key is one step at a time."