

# Father, son both won championships

By Sharon Corcoran

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One has the gift of gab while the other is a man of few words, but after 34 years, father and son have major championships in common.

Larry Stephens started competing in rodeos at age 10 and became a world champion at 18. His son A.J. started wrestling at 6 and pinned down the Class 4A state championship last month.

While A.J. has little to say, his father has no trouble bragging about his son and offering stories from their years of competition.

Although he was quick to brag on his son's accomplishments, though, he was a little reluctant at first to talk about his own.

"You only need one sentence in there about me," Larry said. "I'm the has-been; he's the current champion."

He said he has to brag about his son because you wouldn't expect A.J. to do any bragging, or really talk much at all.

"If you want anything," Larry said, "you'll have to drag it out of him."

"The coach asked for his bio to introduce him at the state tournament, and he'd always say, 'A.J. Stephens.' That's it. This year, the coach asked me; it was the only year they read off his accomplishments. He did all his talking on the mat."

Perhaps it takes a proud father to mention a son's accomplishments in this family. It was Larry's father, Dale Stephens, who listed his accomplishments: 14 championship saddles and 150 trophies from the rodeo circuit.

A.J. won 371 matches in a 12-year wrestling career and lost just 28, his grandfather said, winning 75 championship brackets and 150 medals. He was Kansas Kids state champion at 130 pounds (14 and under) in 2005.

In his first year in kids wrestling, Larry said, A.J. practiced the whole season but only wrestled in the final tournament at Colby. He won his weight, and people asked if he wanted to go to the bidistrict tournament, but the family decided not to.

The next year, his dad said, A.J. won many tournaments and went to the state competition in Topeka.

"He got educated," Larry said. "He got whupped pretty good. But it's a good feat to get to state; you're in the top 16 in the state whether you place or not."

"The next year, he went to state — I think he placed then and every year after."

Though he was eligible for Kansas Kids wrestling until age 17, A.J. quit those tournaments after his freshman year in high school, when he was a state champion. He took sixth in the high school Class 4A state tournament his freshman year, didn't place his sophomore year and



L. Stephens



Larry at 18



A.J. Stephens

finished fourth his junior year after going into the tournament with a 46-0 record. This year, he was 41-1 going into state.

Winning state was always a goal, A.J. said, until this year. This time, it was just to go one match at a time.

A.J. only got excited three times in his wrestling career, Larry said, when he won his first match, when he won the Kansas Kids state title and when he won the high school state title. Otherwise, he came off the mat the same as he went on.

In high school, A.J.'s record was 152-18, Larry said; the coach looked it up and told him the record for most wins in a high school career was 157.

A.J. was a dedicated wrestler, his father said, has had good coaches and went to freestyle camps, and he's a pretty good football player.

"I thank the Lord for giving me the abilities to wrestle," A.J. said.

Though he has received scholarship offers, A.J. said he doesn't plan to wrestle in college. The first time he caught a college coach's attention was when he was 8, his dad said; the Iowa State University team stopped at the Village Inn in Colby on their way through, and A.J. was talking to the wrestlers in the lobby and then was doing wrestling moves with the coach, who gave him a business card and said to call when he was closer to graduating.

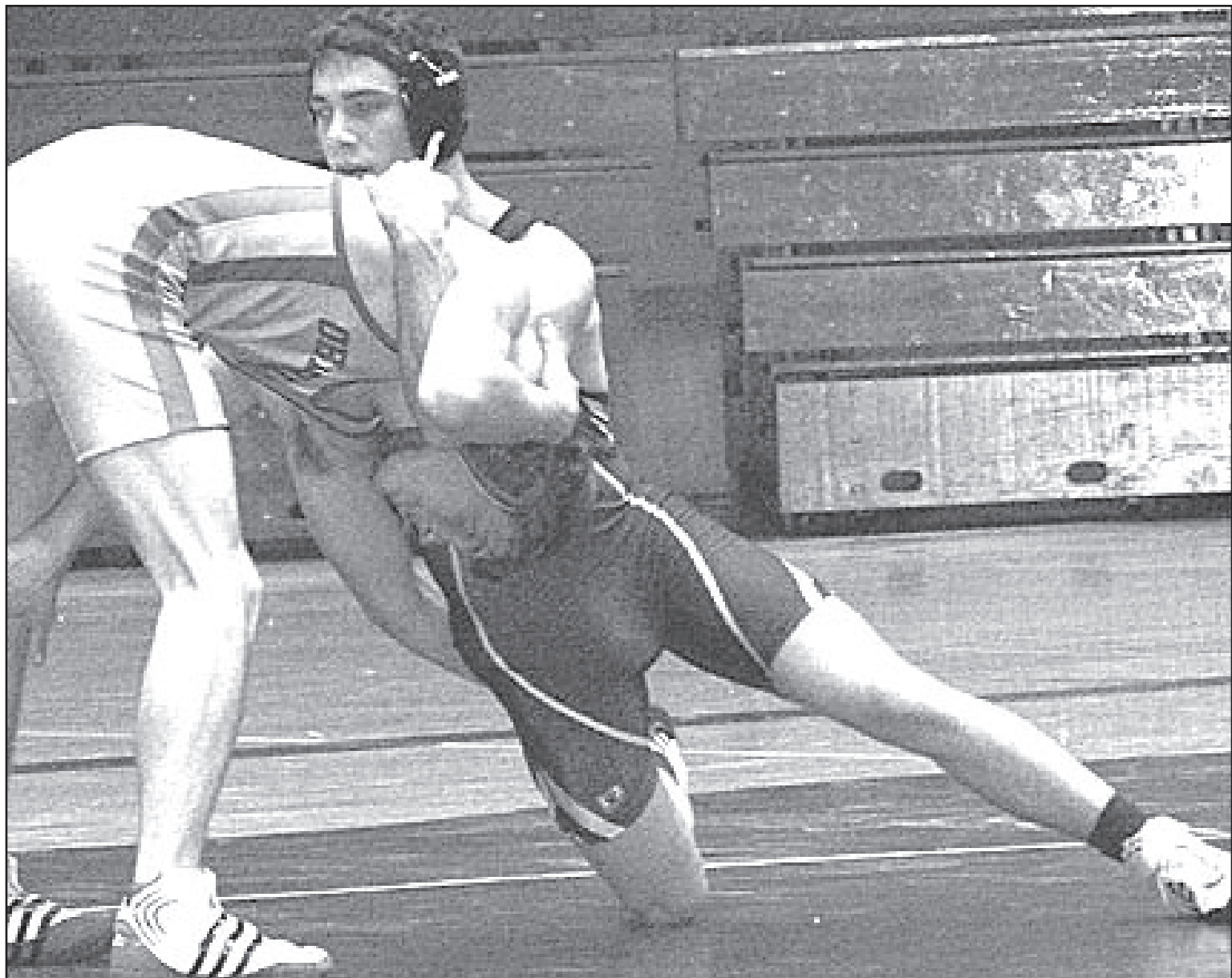
A.J. said he hasn't decided where he's going or what to study.

"Hopefully, I'll find something I like and am good at," he said.

Larry said his son is being coy about his future. He wants to be a welding engineer, and his dad says he has no doubts about his son's abilities.

"He can do about anything he puts his mind to," Larry said. "He's a good welder; Gary Farris has taught him a lot. And the boy knows how to work."

A.J. works as a welder at Farris Manufacturing, and his dad says sometimes he stays late and works after everyone else has left. He started working on the farm at 7, Larry said, and he's never been a day without a job. He has worked on combines at W-R Equipment and worked on farms.



Senior A.J. Stephens beat junior Everett Urban of Oberlin during Goodland's dual with the Red Devils at the Max Jones Fieldhouse in January, putting the Cowboys back in the lead. Goodland won the

dual 42-22 after taking a firm lead in the upper weights. Stephens went on to win the Class 4A state title.

Photo by Sharon Corcoran/The Goodland Star-News

## Former rodeo champion says family is blessed

Though he had to quit farming after several years of drought, a former national rodeo champion says his family is blessed when it comes to work.

Larry Stephens said his wife Shelli is a nurse at Goodland Regional Medical Center. Their daughter Holly, 24, is the director of the Colby Chamber of Commerce, and Lacy, 21, has a degree as a radiology technician and is taking stenography classes. She lives in Wichita, where her husband, Brandon Nemechek, a 2002 Goodland High graduate, is a product engineer for GE Aviation Systems.

Larry said their son A.J., a senior at Goodland High School and Class 4A state wrestling champion, has never been without a job and is making plans for college.

Larry said he farmed until 2003, when after too many bad years, he ran out of money and had to move to town. He went back to school to be a radiology technician. He graduated in 2006 with an associate's degree

from Colby Community College but was never able to schedule his time to do "clinicals" at a hospital.

He has been driving a grain truck, trying to get enough experience to get a job with a major company like Federal Express or United Parcel Service. He said though he has been hauling grain since 1978, that isn't considered experience since it wasn't for an over-the-road carrier.

A member of the Goodland High class of 1974, Larry also wrestled in high school. He said the only kids' program back then was local — there were no tournaments — so he didn't start wrestling until junior high.

Things have changed, though, he said. If you're going to compete in wrestling, you have to start young.

He coached kids' wrestling when A.J. was younger and has helped several wrestlers who needed a little extra work. Wrestling is a good family activity, he said; you make a lot of friends.

Rodeo was also a good family

activity, he said, adding that his sister also rode. He said the family hooked up the camper and went to rodeos all season.

His first rodeo experience wasn't as stellar as A.J.'s first wrestling tournament, however.

"They had young bulls for the little ones," he said. "My bull rears up, blows snot all over the whole chute. I cinched the rope, and they asked if I was ready to go, and I said, 'nope.' It took several tries to get up the nerve to say, 'open the gate,' and then I was thrown off immediately — I was never so glad to get on the ground."

He competed in the junior and then senior divisions of the Little Britches Rodeo in bareback riding, bull riding, flag race, steer wrestling, roping and even saddle broncs once.

He qualified for the national finals when he was 10 and went every year after that, winning the championship in flag racing his junior year of high school. It was just in the United States, he said, but they call it the

"world champion."

He broke the world record in flag racing, and said that felt as good as winning the championship.

He continued to rodeo at Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Okla., and wanted to be a professional steer wrestler. His knees had other plans.

"I tore my knees up," he said, "and it got expensive putting them back together."

He said he knew he wanted to farm and had only gone to college for the rodeo, so he didn't finish, thinking he wouldn't need a degree.

He said if he hadn't hurt his knees, he would have continued with rodeo for some time but would have hung it up by now.

"I'm too old," he said.

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## School calendar for April 1 to April 8

**Today:** Gold Day. 10 a.m., junior high track at Burlington Invitational. Northwest Kansas League Art Show at Atwood.

**Wednesday:** Black Day. Elementary Bank Day. 3:45 p.m., PDC meeting. 3:30 p.m., Lifetouch high school spring pictures. Northwest Kansas League Art Show at Atwood. State Leadership Showcase at Wichita.

**Thursday:** Gold Day. 3 and 5 p.m., varsity and junior varsity softball at Scott City. Northwest Kansas League Art Show at Atwood. State Leadership Showcase at Wichita.

**Friday:** Black Day. 3 and 5:30 p.m., varsity and junior varsity baseball at Colby. 8 a.m., boys varsity golf at Norton. 3 and 5 p.m., varsity and junior varsity softball at Colby. 2 p.m., track at Norton Invitational. State Leadership Showcase at Wichita.

**Monday:** 2 p.m., boys varsity tennis at Hays.

**Tuesday:** Black Day. 4 p.m., West Site Council. 1 p.m., boys varsity golf. Noon, boys varsity tennis at WaKeeney. 3 and 5 p.m., varsity and junior varsity baseball against Ulysses.

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