

## ELI BARAJAS

### Sunnyside's newest state champion

106-pound grappler joins exclusive group as 41st member

■ PATRICK SHELBY  
Managing Editor

TACOMA — On the eve of his 17th birthday, Eli Barajas has had one sporting goal burning within since the age of five – to be a state wrestling champion like his accomplished brother.

For the past two years at the Mat Classic, the Sunnyside junior has never medaled and his fire to be the best drove him to work even harder this season. He remained after practice to drill with his coaches, teammates and brother Jesse, a two-time state champion.

The 106-pound grappler stood ready with a fierce focus to make his own mat dream a reality. The moment was at hand for him to utilize his knowledge, experience and passion of the sport which embodies his athletic character.

On Saturday, Feb. 22, the third-ranked Barajas took a conservative approach into his 4A finals round against No. 1 Collin Jack, a Decatur sophomore. Realizing this was the most important match of his life and competing on the biggest stage, he didn't want to rush the action and get caught – lose.

With 15 seconds remaining in a scoreless match, Barajas utilized a rare "sit down hip heist" in his arsenal of moves to escape and captured a dramatic 1-0 victory which shocked the thousands of spectators in the Tacoma Dome as they cheered wildly in admiration.

"I know I needed only one point to win. I was down and knew he wasn't going to be able to turn me. I haven't been really turned all season or in practice like on



Patrick Shelby/Sunnyside Sun

**DREAM SEASON COMPLETE** — Sunnyside High School junior Eli Barajas wins the Class 4A 106-pound state championship match at Mat Classic XXXII on Saturday, Feb. 22, in the Tacoma Dome. Barajas (42-2) made the most of the final 15 seconds with a dramatic 1-0 decision over Decatur sophomore Collin Jack (35-5).

my back," Sunnyside's 41st state champion confidently acknowledged after his dad bear hugged him as he left mat No. 23.

Barajas said his mindset has changed considerably over the course of the past couple of years, complimenting his almost

year-round training regimen.

"He's a student of the sport," coach George Paulus clearly explained. "There's one thing about wrestling but Eli knows how to do a lot of stuff. He's accomplished in many phases of the sport. And a couple of them that suit him really well which is

leg riding. He's pretty nimble and very athletic, and also acrobatic. He's developed a skill set that enables him to be a very good grappler."

■ Patrick Shelby can be contacted at 509-837-4500, ext. 110 or email PShelby@sunnysidesun.com

## SHS boys finish second

TACOMA — After proudly watching his seven wrestlers take their individual turns at the podium in receiving their medals, the moment they were all waiting for arrived as the entire Sunnyside squad gathered around coach George Paulus and celebrated their second place 4A team finish and magical Mat Classic XXXII experience.

Heading into the finals, Sunnyside trailed defending state champion Chiawana by four points. The Riverhawks were in control of their title hopes with four competing in first-place matches. Both teams were solidly deep, but the Grizzlies would need a couple of breaks to overtake the No. 1 seeded squad.

SHS junior Eli Barajas (42-2) started off the final session with a dramatic 1-0 decision over Decatur sophomore Collin Jack (35-5) for the 106-pound state championship win.

Defending state champion sophomore EJ Villanueva (38-4) faced off against Tahoma junior Yusief Lillie (36-2) in the 120 final. Last year's runner-up junior Andrew Macias (32-3) took on Curtis senior Aizayah Yacapin (34-1) in the 132-weight class. Both wrestlers battled to the end in their tough matches and brought home second-place finishes.

In addition to the three Grizzly finalists, junior Austin Villanueva and senior Fabian Ortega captured third-place medals, while freshman Alex Fernandez secured fourth and senior Alan Ochoa sixth, bringing the team total to 132 points – 5.5 ahead of Tahoma for second and 11 behind the unyielding Riverhawks.

There are five division of boys wrestling, 1A, 2A, 3A, 4A and 2B-1B represented at the Mat Classic. Granger won the 1A state championship team title, Toppenish 2A, Mt. Si (Spokane) 3A, Chiawana 4A and Tonasket 2B-1B.

### TEAM RESULTS

1st Place – Chiawana, 143 points.  
2nd Place – Sunnyside, 132.  
3rd Place – Tahoma, 126.5.

### INDIVIDUAL SUMMARIES

4A 106  
1st Place – Junior Elijah Barajas, scored 23 team points.  
1st Place Match  
Elijah Barajas (42-2) defeated Decatur sophomore Collin Jack (35-5) by decision, 1-0.  
4A 113  
4th Place – Freshman Alex Fernandez, scored 15 team points.  
4A 120  
2nd Place – Sophomore Edward Villanueva, scored 23 team points.  
4A 120  
Francisco Magallon, (24-11) scored 2 team points.  
A 126  
3rd Place – Senior Fabian Ortega, scored 20 team points.  
4A 132  
2nd Place – Junior Andrew Macias, scored 22 team points.  
4A 138  
3rd Place – Junior Austin Villanueva, scored 18 team points.  
4A 160  
6th Place – Senior Alan Ochoa, scored 7 team points

Furthermore, three of the five second place teams were also from Eastern Washington.

"We always like to think that we come away with most of the state champions, which can be true on given years, but we like to think wrestling kind of goes through this valley. It does this year," coach Paulus candidly confirmed. "It's going to be the same thing again, so the (westside) better figure out how to deal with it. That's what they've got to do."

The Grizzlies' state trophy was the fourth in the past eight years for Paulus, who is retiring after 31 years as head coach. The Hall of Famer had 21 Mat Classic team finishes in the top 10, along with 24 state champions and 118 medalists.

"That's what wrestling is all about really, it's supposed to be about having fun. If it gets too serious, it's not fun anymore," coach conveyed as he walked toward the northeast exit of the Tacoma Dome on Saturday night. "We're happy! We're going to have some pizza now."

## Girls team battles for sixth place victory

Eliza Rodriguez wins third place medal

■ PATRICK SHELBY  
Managing Editor

TACOMA — "Our girls have to realize that their goals and aspirations just don't happen during the weekend that the tournament is on, it takes a lot of preparation, self-discipline and sacrifice to give yourself the best shot," Sunnyside head coach Dave Mendoza conveyed while he praised his four-member team's performance.

Junior Eliza Rodriguez (33-8) earned a third-place medal in the 100-pound with her win over Granger freshman Mia Zuniga (39-13) by major decision, 15-3.

After winning her two opening round matches on Friday evening, Rodriguez said she felt good and was looking forward to Saturday's action. She went up in the stands to get some hugs from her family and was back on the floor ensuring that she would make weight for tomorrow.

She entered the competition with a goal to be the first Grizzly girl state champion. On Saturday morning, Rodriguez faced Federal Way sophomore and Mat Classic 2020 Champion Kayla McKinley-Johnson (35-0), who won in sudden victory - 1 over Eliza Rodriguez, 10-5 in the semifinals.

Coach said Eliza wrestled strong over the weekend and were optimistic to get her into the finals. They had to



Patrick Shelby/Sunnyside Sun

Sunnyside High School junior Eliza Rodriguez (33-8) earns a third-place medal in the 100-pound weight class at Mat Classic XXXII on Saturday, Feb. 22. Rodriguez entered the weekend looking to be the first Grizzly girl state champion.

see **GIRLS**, page B2

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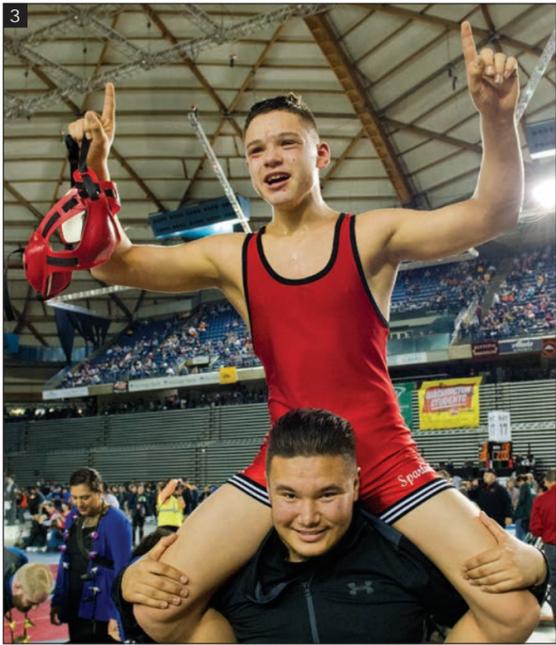
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**TACOMA DOME STATE ACTION**

(1) With 15 seconds remaining in a scoreless match, Barajas utilized a rare "sit down hip heist" in his arsenal of moves to escape and captured a dramatic 1-0 victory over Collin Jack, of Decatur. (2) Sunnyside High School sophomore and defending state champion EJ Villanueva brings home a second place medal. (3) Granger High School Conan Northwind gets a ride from his brother Carson after winning his 138-pound state championship. (4) Sunnyside Senior Fabian Ortega receives a hug from Steven Sanchez following his third-place win. (5) Sunnyside Senior Lourdes Torres competes in the quarterfinals.



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**GIRLS: Wrestling**

continued from page B1

manage her weight the night before and her lack of energy showed during that extended match. She came up two points short.

"She had a great season. Eliza is one of those who will do a lot of off-season work and be stronger when she comes back for her senior year," Mendoza expressed.

Despite her difficult season with shoulder injuries which began in December, senior Lourdes "Lulu" Torres competed like the warrior she's been throughout her Grizzly career. Torres was cleared by doctors to wrestle, but the message delivered was she would have to wrestle through the pain.

"At this tournament you could just tell that she wanted so bad to do the best she could," coach noted as he added that Torres hurt her other shoulder prior to the fifth and sixth place match and they had to default her last match.

According to coach, both

**Team Results**

6th Place - Sunnyside Girls, 54  
12th Place - Toppenish, 44  
14th Place - Granger, 41.5

**Individual Summaries**

Girls 100  
3rd Place - Eliza Rodriguez of Sunnyside Girls  
4th Place - Mia Zuniga of Granger Girls  
3rd Place Match  
Girls 105  
1st Place - Isabella Morales of

Toppenish Girls  
1st Place Match  
Sophomore Isabella Morales (34-1) defeated Warden senior Aaliyah Escamilla (40-9) by decision, 6-1.  
Girls 110  
5th Place - Alexus Ramos of Sunnyside Girls  
Girls 125  
3rd Place - Ruby Rios of Toppenish Girls  
Girls 130  
2nd Place - Viktoriya Torres of Granger Girls  
Girls 170  
6th Place - Lourdes Torres of Sunnyside Girls

Lulu's parents and Mendoza were very proud of her wrestling accomplishments and demonstrated team leadership talents. She gave the state champion the best match of the Mat Classic in their quarterfinals.

"Lulu was ahead of her and gave up a couple of fault points because she couldn't do anything. It's hard to wrestle at that level with one arm but she did the best that she could. She battled through a lot this year," he reported.

Junior Riley Guerrero's state

experience started off with an illegal head butt to her nose which likely was broken but couldn't be confirmed by doctors without an x-ray. Guerrero continued to battle by winning her next match and for the second consecutive year, she was right there at the medal round but was unable to advance.

"Riley has another year to come back and she plans to do some off-season work," Mendoza said. "I expect her to return next year and be one of the favorites in our region." Freshman Alexus Ramos

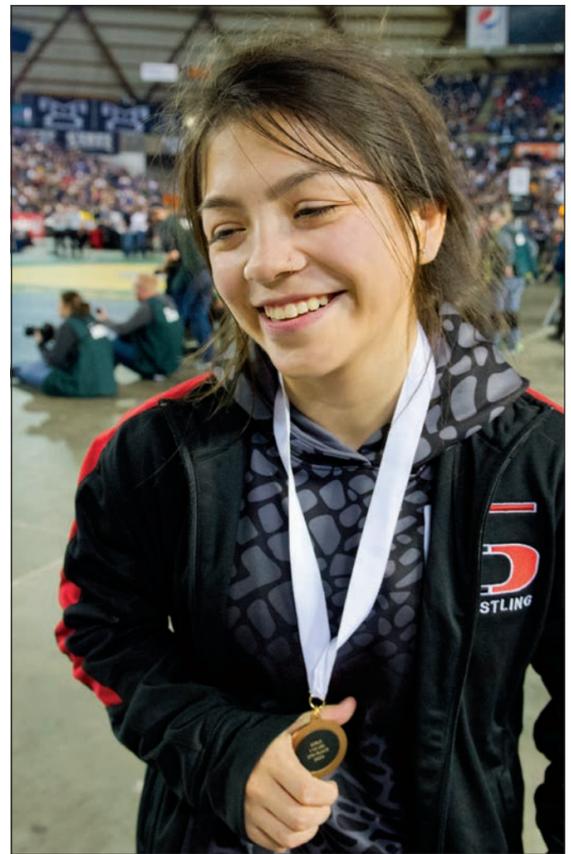
made her first Mat Classic experience a memorable one by winning fifth place. Coach indicated that she has the right mindset and inner drive to be a standout wrestler and will only get better as she gets more mat experience.

"I told her fifth place with that group of girls you were wrestling was an awesome accomplishment. She wants on top of the podium and I expect her to really work it to get there. Now, she has that experience of being there and knows what to expect from the other girls," Mendoza described.

Following her second match defeat, Torres told Ramos, "Your opponent may have won the match, but she didn't win your heart!"

In her next match, Ramos flipped the switch and was back on track and competing for state hardware.

Patrick Shelby can be contacted at 509-837-4500, ext. 110 or email PShelby@sunnysidesun.com



Sunnyside freshman Alexus Ramos is all smiles after receiving her fifth place medal.

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