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## **Becahi's Cruz concludes rehab with silver medal at wrestling nationals**

By Mark Wogenrich, OF THE MORNING CALL

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Darian Cruz said the crowd and the mat spotlight and the setting caused him to freeze Friday. The leg he broke in January, however, felt just fine.

Six months after a serious injury ended his freshman season at Bethlehem Catholic, Cruz punctuated his comeback with a silver medal at the USA Wrestling Freestyle national championships in Fargo, N.D. The 15-year-old Cruz swept his bouts in the 98-pound Cadet division before falling 3-0, 1-0 to Phillips Laux of Iowa.

"I felt like once I got out there, my nerves got to me, and I felt really cold," Cruz said. "I was ready, but then I just got this nervous chill. Still, it was a good week."

The week-long Fargo Nationals, the nation's biggest wrestling tournament with more than 4,000 competitors, concludes Saturday with the Junior freestyle division. Nazareth senior Zach Horan, who won a national title two years ago, is in the medal round at 125 pounds. Earlier this week, Parkland's Forest Touchberry (130) and Saucon Valley's Ray O'Donnell (160) each placed seventh to earn all-America status in the Cadet Greco-Roman tournament.

For Cruz, the national tournament served as a partial substitute for the high school postseason he missed. In January, Cruz sustained a broken tibia, cutting short a freshman season in which he had a 23-3 record and was the area's top-ranked wrestler at 103 pounds. Cruz attended the regional and state tournaments to watch his teammates, including brother Randy, but felt out of place sitting in the stands.

"I'm saving the postseason I didn't get to have for all of next year," Cruz said. "I have the mentality that I still have to wrestle my freshman year. I'll have all the hype and energy of not wrestling districts, regionals and states at the high school level."

Cruz's injury required a cast and boot but no surgery. After having the cast removed, he began rehab and returned to wrestling several weeks after states concluded in Hershey in March.

"He bounced back pretty quickly from that horrific injury," Bethlehem Catholic coach Jeff Karam said. "His flexibility and movement weren't what they were before the injury, but over time they came back. This is more or less his postseason."

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Cruz has been wrestling freestyle this offseason, winning a state title to qualify for nationals. In Fargo, Cruz moved comfortably through his bracket, winning eight matches without being taken to the third period.

The championship bout was a rematch between wrestlers who competed in the national duals. Cruz had beaten Laux there and felt he could repeat — until stepping onto the mat for the final.

"I couldn't get my shots off, and I felt like I was too far away to shoot," Cruz said. "It was nerves. It was very important for me to place high, definitely in the top two. So I think I did pretty well."

Horan, who has placed second at the PIAA championships three times, returned to Fargo looking for another medal. Two years ago he was a candidate for the outstanding-wrestler award after winning a Cadet Greco-Roman title at 112 pounds. Last year, Horan placed second at 125 in Cadet freestyle and fourth in Greco-Roman.

Through his first eight bouts in the Junior freestyle division this week, Horan had four falls and did not allow a point.

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