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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Byrd Becomes Big Ten Champion at 133 Pounds

EVANSTON, Ill. – [Lucas Byrd](#) became a Big Ten Champion at 133 pounds for the first time in his career at the Big Ten Championships on Sunday (March 9) from Welsh-Ryan Arena. He's Illinois' second Big Ten Champion at 133 pounds 21 years after Mark Jayne was the first in 2004. Additionally, he etches his name into the record book as the program's 79th Big Ten Champion all-time, the fourth most from any school in the conference's history.

No. 2 seed Byrd avenged his only loss of the season in his rematch against No. 1 seed (ranked No. 1 nationally by InterMat) Drake Ayala of Iowa who beat him in a 4-2 decision on Jan. 17 in Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Tonight was a completely different story. In the first period Byrd got in on a couple of his shot attempts near the edge of the ring before running out of real estate and both wrestlers being forced to reset back to their feet in the middle.

The Cincinnati native started the second period on bottom and wasted no time at all getting out appearing as if he was going to get the two-point reversal on Ayala, but he achieved much more than that. 16 seconds into period two he forced Ayala to his back to get the massive pin just 3:16 into the match. Entering today he's never finished higher than third in this tournament in his career; now he stamps his name into the Illinois record books forever in his final year as a Big Ten Champion.

"Regardless of wins or losses, you're proud of your team if they compete the way our guys did this weekend," said head coach [Mike Poeta](#). "[Lucas Byrd](#) winning the Big Ten Tournament and pinning the No. 1 wrestler in the country was a nice start to the final's session. Lucas has really taken himself to another level this year, especially as of late. He just looks different. His wrestling, his facial expressions, the way he walks, it just has something special about it. He earned this title. [Kannon Webster](#) is wrestling and competing in a way you don't see often by freshman. Just like Byrd, when there's something important on the line, they elevate themselves. Both Braunagel's finished strong with each beating elite guys twice in the tournament. It's not easy to beat guys that good once let alone twice in the same tournament. [Edmond Ruth](#) also finished strong with great wins; it was some of the best wrestling he's done in his career. [Braeden Scoles](#) and [Luke Luffman](#) had lots of positive moments throughout the tournament. They showed they're right there with the best."

"There's heartbreak and ups and downs to all of this. [Caelan Riley](#), [Danny Pucino](#) and [Jason Kraisser](#) fought hard and gave us their all this tournament and this whole season. I'm very proud of who they are and how they represent us."

"Overall, we left Evanston excited about what we saw. The guys came to compete. The Big Ten Tournament is a big deal, but it won't mean much to us if we don't continue it into the NCAA Tournament in two weeks. We have some big challenges ahead of us."

105.5 points are the most points the Illini have scored at the Big Ten Championships in 14 years, tied for fifth in program history with the 2011 and 1997 squads coached by Mark Johnson. Fifth place is also the highest they've finished since the 2012-13 team coached by Jim Heffernan also placed fifth.

No. 5 seed at 149 pounds [Kannon Webster](#) wrestled for the championship belt against No. 3 seed Ridge Lovett of Nebraska. Lovett escaped from the bottom in period two to score the only point of the match. Webster chose to start period three on the feet to try to get the winning takedown, but it was not in the cards this time around for the redshirt freshman as he fell in a 1-0 decision. Webster turns his attention to the NCAA Championships after being the first Illinois redshirt freshman to wrestle in the Big Ten Championship finals since Mike Carr in 2018.

Three Orange and Blue grapplers wrestled in the third-place matches of their respective weight brackets being [Danny Braunagel](#) (174 pounds), [Edmond Ruth](#) (184 pounds) and [Zac Braunagel](#) (197 pounds). All three walked away with a bronze medal.

No. 7 seed D. Braunagel advanced to the third-place bout handling his afternoon consolation semifinal bout with a tech. fall over No. 12 seed Branson John of Maryland, 19-4 (6:43). In the bronze-medal match he had a rematch against Ohio State's No. 2 seed Carson Kharchla whom he beat 10-7 yesterday in the quarterfinals. Tonight, he had his number again hanging on with everything he had left in the final 20 seconds of the third period to not surrender a takedown and secure the 4-1 decision win.

No. 6 seed Ruth advanced to the third-place match avenging one of his losses earlier in the season against No. 4 seed Gabe Arnold (IOWA). In a high-level defensive match that required a round of tie breakers; Ruth rode Arnold out to improve to a team-best 5-0 in overtime matches this season, TB-1 2-1. In his bronze-medal bout he faced Maryland's No. 5 seed Jaxon Smith where Ruth wrestled one of his best matches of the weekend and was rewarded with a 5-2 decision win.

No. 5 seed Z. Braunagel had himself a battle in the consolation semifinals against No. 7 seed Camden McDanel of Nebraska that he emerged victorious in a 2-1 decision. In his bronze-medal match much like his twin brother, Danny, he had a rematch against No. 4 seed Isaiah Salazar of Minnesota whom he knocked off via 10-4 decision in yesterday's quarterfinals. Tonight's match was much closer and required an overtime period. Exactly 30 seconds into sudden victory he exploded into a shot on a single leg of Salazar making no mistakes circling and securing the takedown, SV-1 4-1.

No. 6 seed at 165 pounds [Braeden Scoles](#) fell in his consolation semifinal bout to No. 5 seed Andrew Sparks of Minnesota via decision, 10-5. He was set to wrestle in the night's fifth-place bout, but Northwestern's No. 8 seed Maxx Mayfield medically forfeited giving Scoles fifth place automatically.

No. 5 seed at 285 pounds [Luke Luffman](#) dropped his afternoon consolation semifinal match to No. 3 seed Joshua Heindselman of Michigan in a 7-3 decision. In his fifth-place bout he had a rematch against Ohio State's No. 4 seed Nick Feldman whom he decided 4-3 in yesterday's quarterfinals. Luffman ultimately fell in a hard-fought battle via decision 7-2 to take sixth place.

The seven NCAA Championships qualifiers ([Lucas Byrd](#), [Kannon Webster](#), [Braeden Scoles](#), [Danny Braunagel](#), [Edmond Ruth](#), [Zac Braunagel](#) and [Luke Luffman](#)) are the most the program is sending to the national meet since the 2019-20 team sent eight.

The seasons of 125 pounder [Caelan Riley](#), 141 pounder [Danny Pucino](#) and 157 pounder [Jason Kraisser](#) hang on the hopes of receiving one of the four at-large bids in their respective weight classes that will be announced later this week.

TEAM SCORES

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1. Penn State – 181.5
 2. Nebraska – 137.0
 3. Iowa – 112.0
 4. Minnesota – 108.5
 - 5. Illinois – 105.5**
 6. Ohio State – 95.5
 7. Michigan – 71.0
 8. Maryland – 54.0
 9. Rutgers – 46.0
 10. Purdue – 44.5
 11. Indiana – 33.0
 12. Northwestern – 21.5
 13. Wisconsin – 19.0
 14. Michigan State – 11.5

UP NEXT

The Illinois grapplers are off for a week before the seven qualifiers head to Philadelphia for the NCAA Championships on March 20-22.

ILLINOIS RESULTS

125: Caelan Riley – 13 seed

Round 1: [4] Luke Lilledahl (PSU) over [13] Caelan Riley (ILL), fall (4:09).
Cons. Round 1: [13] Caelan Riley (ILL) dec. [12] Christian Tanefeu (MICH), 5-1.
Cons. Round 2: [6] Jacob Moran (IND) tech. fall [13] Caelan Riley (ILL), 23-6 (5:49).
Ninth-place bracket: [13] Caelan Riley (ILL) over [12] Christian Tanefeu (MICH), fall (4:28).
Ninth-place bracket: [5] Joey Cruz (IOWA) major dec. [13] Caelan Riley (ILL), 11-2.
Riley eliminated.

133: Lucas Byrd – 2 seed

Received Round 1 bye.
Quarterfinal: [2] Lucas Byrd (ILL) dec. [7] Zan Fugitt (WIS), 9-2.
Semifinal: [2] Lucas Byrd (ILL) dec. [3] Braxton Brown (MD), 5-1.
Final: [2] Lucas Byrd (ILL) over [1] Drake Ayala (IOWA), fall (3:16).
Byrd placed first.

141: Danny Pucino – 7 seed

Round 1: [7] Danny Pucino (ILL) dec. [10] Chris Cannon (NU), 7-1.
Quarterfinal: [2] Jesse Mendez (OSU) tech. fall [7] Danny Pucino (ILL), 19-4 (5:13).
Cons. Round 2: [8] Henry Porter (IND) major dec. [7] Danny Pucino (ILL), 20-9.
Pucino eliminated.

149: Kannon Webster – 5 seed

Round 1: [5] Kannon Webster (ILL) dec. [12] Clayton Jones (MSU), 9-3.
Quarterfinal: [5] Kannon Webster (ILL) dec. [4] Dylan D'Emilio (OSU), 5-1.
Semifinal: [5] Kannon Webster (ILL) dec. [1] Shayne Van Ness (PSU), 4-2.
Final: [3] Ridge Lovett (NEB) dec. [5] Kannon Webster (ILL), 1-0.
Webster placed second.

157: Jason Kraisser – 11 seed

Round 1: [6] Joey Blaze (PUR) major dec. [11] Jason Kraisser (ILL), 13-0.
Cons. Round 1: [11] Jason Kraisser (ILL) major dec. Braden Stauffenberg (MSU), 10-0.
Cons. Round 2: [4] Jacori Teemer (IOWA) major dec. [11] Jason Kraisser (ILL), 20-8.
Ninth-place bracket: [10] Conner Harer (RUT) dec. [11] Jason Kraisser (ILL), 6-3.
Kraisser eliminated.

165: Braeden Scoles – 6 seed

Round 1: [6] Braeden Scoles (ILL) over [11] Stoney Buell (PUR), fall (4:59).
Quarterfinal: [6] Braeden Scoles (ILL) dec. [3] Chris Minto (NEB), 4-3.
Semifinal: [2] Mike Caliendo (IOWA) tech. fall [6] Braeden Scoles (ILL), 23-7 (6:46).
Cons. Semifinal: [5] Andrew Sparks (MINN) dec. [6] Braeden Scoles (ILL), 10-5.
Fifth-place match: [6] Braeden Scoles (ILL) over [8] Maxx Mayfield (NU) via medical forfeit.
Scoles placed fifth.

174: Danny Braunagel – 7 seed

Round 1: [7] Danny Braunagel (ILL) over [10] Derek Gilcher (IND), fall (5:00).
Quarterfinal: [7] Danny Braunagel (ILL) dec. [2] Carson Kharchla (OSU), 10-7.
Semifinal: [3] Lenny Pinto (NEB) dec. [7] Danny Braunagel (ILL), 9-8.
Cons. Semifinal: [7] Danny Braunagel (ILL) tech. fall [12] Branson John (MD), 19-4 (6:43).
Third-place match: [7] Danny Braunagel (ILL) dec. [2] Carson Kharchla (OSU), 4-1.
D. Braunagel placed third.

184: Edmond Ruth – 6 seed

Round 1: [6] Edmond Ruth (ILL) dec. [11] Jon Halvorsen (NU), SV-1 4-1.
Quarterfinal: [6] Edmond Ruth (ILL) dec. [3] Silas Allred (NEB), 4-3.
Semifinal: [2] Max McEnelly (MINN) major dec. [6] Edmond Ruth (ILL), 11-3.
Cons. Semifinal: [6] Edmond Ruth (ILL) dec. [4] Gabe Arnold (IOWA), TB-1 2-1.
Third-place match: [6] Edmond Ruth (ILL) dec. [5] Jaxon Smith (MD), 5-2.
Ruth placed third.

197: Zac Braunagel – 5 seed

277: Zac Braunagel – 5 seed

Round 1: [5] Zac Braunagel (ILL) tech. fall [12] Chase Mielnik (MD), 16-0 (5:24).
Quarterfinal: [5] Zac Braunagel (ILL) dec. [4] Isaiah Salazar (MINN), 10-4.
Semifinal: [1] Stephen Buchanan (IOWA) dec. [5] Zac Braunagel (ILL), 4-0.
Cons. Semifinal: [5] Zac Braunagel (ILL) dec. [7] Camden McDanel (NEB), 2-1.
Third-place match: [5] Zac Braunagel dec. [4] Isaiah Salazar (MINN), SV-1 4-1.
Z. Braunagel placed third.

285: Luke Luffman – 5 seed

Round 1: [5] Luke Luffman (ILL) major dec. [12] Max Vanadia (MSU), 15-1.
Quarterfinal: [4] Nick Feldman (OSU) dec. [5] Luke Luffman (ILL), 4-3.
Cons. Round 2: [5] Luke Luffman (ILL) over [11] Harley Andrews (NEB), fall (6:04).
Cons. Semifinal: [3] Joshua Heindselman (MICH) dec. [5] Luke Luffman (ILL), 7-3.
Fifth-place match: [4] Nick Feldman (OSU) dec. [5] Luke Luffman (ILL), 7-2.
Luffman placed sixth.



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