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# Darian Cruz wins national title as Lehigh claims 12th place at NCAAs

ST. LOUIS – The battle of Lehigh Valley wrestlers in the NCAA finals went to the wrestler who stayed close to home to continue his education.

Lehigh junior Darian Cruz broke a 2-2 tie with two takedowns in the final 25 seconds of regulation to defeat Minnesota's Ethan Lizak 6-3 Saturday night at Scottrade Center. Cruz controlled the match from neutral with three takedowns and managed to avoid going underneath Lizak, whose strength is in the top position.

"I'm happy and so blessed to be here," Cruz said. "I've worked my tail off, day in and day out and it feels so good to have it pay off. Another thing I'm really happy about is I made the Lehigh community, my parents, my family, my friends, my coaches so proud. That's the biggest thing to having success, having that drive. All those people are my drive."

The national championship is the 28th won by a Lehigh wrestler and Cruz is the 22nd different Lehigh wrestler to win a national title. His title is the first for a Lehigh wrestler since Zach Rey won at 285 in 2011.

Cruz's national championship capped a tournament in which Lehigh finished in 12th place with 40 team points. The Mountain Hawks crowned two All-Americans with sophomore Scott Parker joining Cruz on the podium with a seventh place finish at 133.

"Our ultimate goal will always be national champs," said Lehigh head coach Pat Santoro, who coached his second national champion. "Our guys wrestled extremely well. I'm proud of them. This is a tough tournament and it gets tougher and tougher every year. I don't know how many All-Americans didn't repeat. You see it every year, national champs don't come back and repeat. It's really hard. You have to take advantage of your time here."

In the rematch with Lizak, who defeated Cruz 8-0 in the Southern Scuffle quarterfinals in January, Cruz set the tone early, showing aggression and initiating a shot that led to a scramble and the first takedown late in the first period. A Lizak escape left Cruz up 2-1 after one. Lizak chose down to begin the second and escaped to tie the match at 2-2. In the third, Cruz chose neutral and after grabbing a leg and inducing a scramble, rolled through to secure the go-ahead takedown on the edge with 21 seconds remaining. The takedown was confirmed by video review. Lizak escaped to pull within 4-3 but Cruz capped the championship win with a counter-takedown in the final seconds.

"We drew up many scenarios," Cruz said. "But at the end of the line, coach Pat (Santoro) said, 'Hey, wrestle. Just outwrestle this kid, and have fun.' At the last second we threw the strategies out the window and dumbed it down and really stuck to the basics. Just wrestle like you know how to wrestle. I've wrestled a lot of tough matches and it's just (another) tough one."

The national title caps a 31-2 junior campaign for Cruz, who also won his second straight EIWA title and finished third at the Southern Scuffle. Cruz won his final 21 bouts this season. Now a two-time All-American, Cruz owns a 90-18 career record.

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It's a big deal," Santoro said. "He accomplished something that is really hard to do, which is great. It can change your life forever, not just in wrestling but what you do. You climb a mountain, you stick a flag in it and you can accomplish anything."

"He just wrestled really well," Santoro continued. "He earned it. He made adjustments. He has just done everything right. He's done all the little things and when you do the little things right, big things happen."

Lehigh brought seven wrestlers to the NCAA Championships and all seven won at least one match in St. Louis. In addition to the two All-Americans, three wrestlers finished just short of All-American status.

The Mountain Hawks will lose nine seniors to graduation, including All-Americans Randy Cruz and Mitch Minotti. Like Lehigh's two previous NCAA Champions before him, Rey and Troy Letters (2004), Darian Cruz will have one more season of eligibility to try and defend his title.

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