

By MIKE NESTER of the SAVANNA TIMES JOURNAL NEWSPAPER

WEST CARROLL HAS ITS FIRST STATE CHAMPIONSHIP.

The high school music department learned last week it had won the IHSA State Music Sweepstakes in Class B with 783 points, besting runner-up Herscher.

The state champion is determined by the amount of points each school acquires at the Solo and Ensemble Contest and Organization Contest held each spring.

At the solo and ensemble contest hosted by West Carroll High School on March 6, the Thunder musicians tallied 366 points through Division I ratings and another 117 points for Division II ratings.

After the first contest, West Carroll held a 483-438 lead over second place Macomb while Herscher, the perennial champions, were third, 60 points behind. With a possible 300 points available at the Organization Contest on April 17 in Forreston, West Carroll clinched its first state title by scoring the maximum amount as the Concert Band, Jazz Band, Jazz Combo, Concert Choir, Treble Choir and Jazz Choir all received Division I ratings. West Carroll's music department had a chip on its shoulder to start the school year after finishing second, third and second in the sweepstakes the past three years.

"We took a hard look at the results from last year and pointed out to our students that we were very close to the top and that it was conceivable that with some extra hard work on their part, especially at the solo/ensemble contest, they could win sweepstakes," said Scott Mattison, West Carroll High School's choir director.

Emily Bressler, the WCHS band director, was of the same mindset. "We are the state champs because we had a dream a year ago," said Bressler. "We saw how close we were to upsetting the 22-year reigning champs (Herscher) with our runner-up trophy and we simply said to the kids, 'We can do this if we all work together.' We told them we would do the work we needed to do if they would do the work they needed to do to prepare for the spring contests. Clearly, they upheld their end of the bargain and we all couldn't be happier."

West Carroll's music program knew that if it wanted to knock off Herscher and bring the first place trophy to West Carroll, members would need to make their mark at the Solo and Ensemble contest, which happened to be in their own back yard. "That became a recurring theme all year long. We had an extraordinary amount of students who wanted to participate in that contest and they worked hard to receive division one ratings," said Mattison. "They achieved that and going into Organization contest we knew we were on top, and in order to stay that way, we had to give top performances at that contest," added Mattison. "And again the students bought into that plan, worked very hard, and were very prepared for contest that day. It is because of the students' hard work that we achieved this goal. We are very proud of them and their accomplishment."

Both music directors point to the students' dedication and hard work that helped win the state title. "We have a huge group of students who are willing to work hard and achieve the goals we set out for them," said Mattison. "They are excited about our program and are willing to put in the extra effort it takes to give good concerts as well as produce good plays and musicals."

Added Mattison, "They practice extra time to make it to IMEA District Festivals and All-State. They are willing to give up morning time to be a part of our Madrigal/Jazz Choir group. They are not afraid to work hard to be successful and make good music."

Bressler echoed her cohort, saying, “To date we have won four state trophies in our department and each year the groups we work with have an entirely different personality. This year's group was very positive, incredibly funny, and very focused and driven with regards to winning.” Added Bressler, “This group of senior leadership set its sights on not only the state sweeps trophy but also on the pep band state honors, then worked their bottoms off to get there. Clearly, the results of their hard work are evident.”

There's already talk of a repeat! “Of course we know there is a big bull's eye on our backs next year, but we will enjoy being on top as long as we can and work to defend the title,” said Bressler, whose husband, Mark, is the West Carroll Intermediate School band director. “We not only made history in West Carroll, but we set a very high standard for performance in our music groups for years to come, a standard we hope to see upheld by our incoming freshmen and generations of music students.”

Both high school music directors also give considerable praise to their colleagues in the lower grade levels of the school district. “No victory exists in a vacuum. We know that this trophy does not just belong to the high school students and Mr. Mattison and I,” said Emily Bressler. “We know it also belongs to (Middle School Band and Chorus Director) Joe Titus, (Intermediate School Band and Choir Director) Mark Bressler, and Primary School Music Director) Anne Parry for their work laying the building blocks of these students' talent at every step of the way before high school.”

“We would like to thank the administration, school teachers and staff, parents, and the communities of Mount Carroll, Savanna and Thomson for their continued support of the music department at West Carroll Community Schools,” said Mattison, a 25-year veteran educator, including 16 years in Iowa and four in Mount Carroll.

Illinois high schools are placed into five classes for the music sweepstakes, based on enrollment. West Carroll won the B Class, defeating Herscher High School by 60 points. Herscher had won the state title 22 of the previous 23 years, losing only to Macomb in 1993. Other champions this year included: AA-Bradley Bourbonnais (858 points); A-Ottawa (1,029); C-Forreston (678); D-Cerro Gordo (387). Milledgeville finished fourth in Class D with 319.5 points and Eastland took seventh in Class C with 468 points.

“It has been a banner year for the West Carroll Music Department,” said Mattison. “We had seven students qualify for All-State—the most ever in our history as West Carroll. The Pep Band was chosen to play at the State Boys Basketball Tournament. And now the success of winning the sweepstakes competition tops it all off.

“A big thank you goes out to everyone for your support of our program. Our students work hard and that has obviously paid off. If you happen to run into any of our music students, please take a moment and congratulate them on a job well done.”