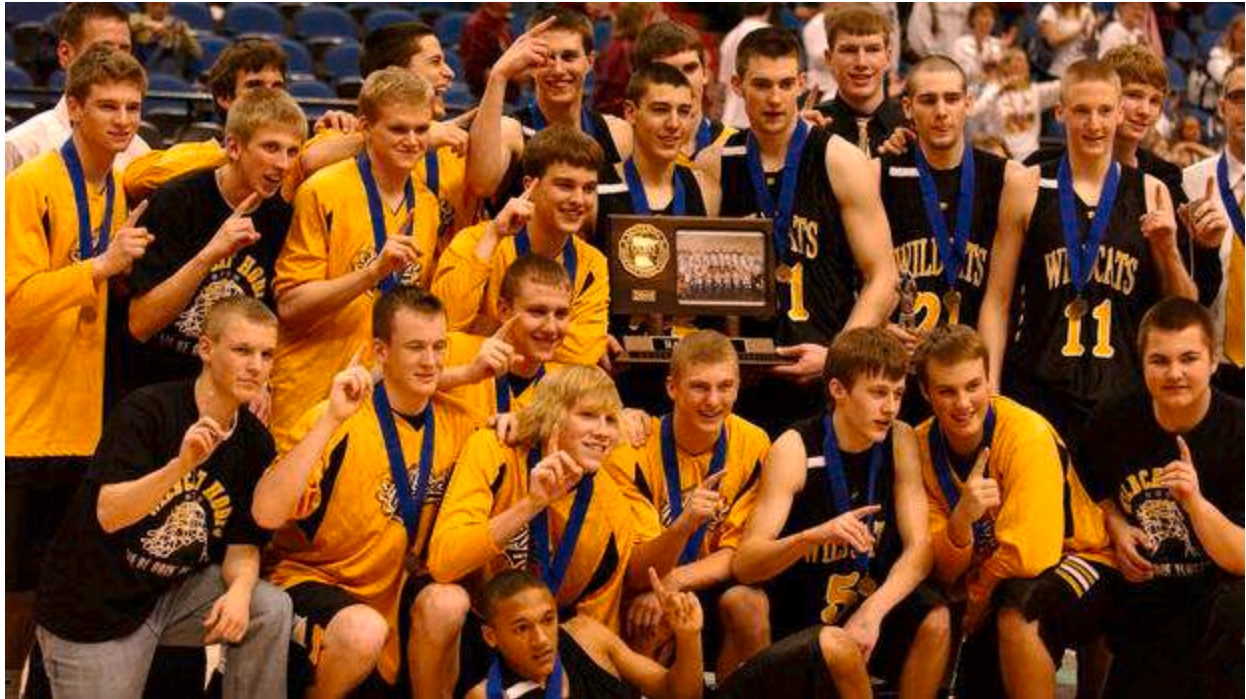


'Cats wild ride: An oral history of the 2008 NLS state champion boys basketball team

By [Curt Hogg](#) on Mar 5, 2018 at 3:10 p.m.



Ten years ago, a dozen young men from New London-Spicer High School, backed by their coaches and community, set out to achieve one unified goal: bring home the first boys state title in school history.

It took endless conditioning drills, a one-loss regular season and a heart-pounding win at the Target Center in one of the most memorable games in state history, but the 2007-08 Wildcats boys basketball team achieved their goal -- or as they would tell you, reached their destiny.

What follows is an oral history of the first boys team to raise a state championship banner at New London-Spicer.

Cats chemistry

NLS' run to a state title didn't come out of nowhere. Its five senior starters -- Chris Tengwall, Wade Powers, Skylar Wachter, Jordan Radel and Jackson Wright -- had been playing together on the same AAU teams since they were kids. Just one season prior, the Wildcats made it to the 2007 Section 5AA title game before getting worn down in the second half by Gibbon-Fairfax-Winthrop. There was plenty to build upon entering the '07-08 campaign.

Chris Tengwall, senior forward: "We had been playing together since we were kids. We knew how each one of us, we knew one another very well. We knew the playing styles of everyone else. It's really attributed to how long we had been playing together."

Skylar Wachter, senior guard: "Traveling ball was huge for us. That's probably where we saw the most growth as a team. For us, we didn't have individual players play at different places for AAU. We all played

AAU for the same team; we had our high school team as an AAU team. We were close as friends from the top down, with players and coaches even.“

Wade Powers, senior center: “Heading into that season, our sights were set on a state championship and we were going to be upset if we had anything shy of that. We had been playing together since fifth grade or sixth grade. I think growing up we knew we had something good going.”

Wachter: “Playing traveling ball, our whole team was always together so we had that niche. Whether we won tournaments or placed second or third or didn’t even place we had lots of fun.”

Matt Cordes, head coach: “You could see some potential from within this crew. There was a lot of wonderfully gifted athletes. We just needed to put some pieces together and put them in the right spots.”

Tengwall: “What separated us from anyone or any other team was how well we got along, our chemistry and our overall dynamic. We all knew what role we each had to play. It was something that I had never seen before. We knew each person how they were going to react and we knew how to feed off of each other. When you can throw a pass without being in a spot but you know they’re going to be in that spot, that’s tough to beat.”

‘Put in work and get buckets’

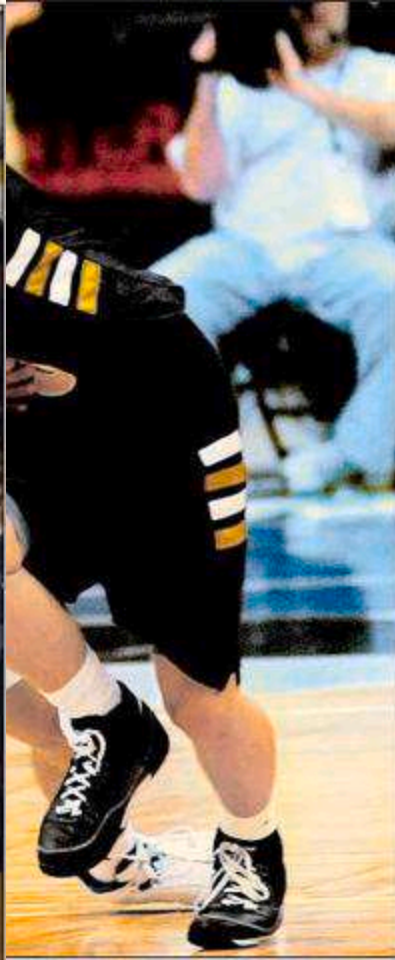
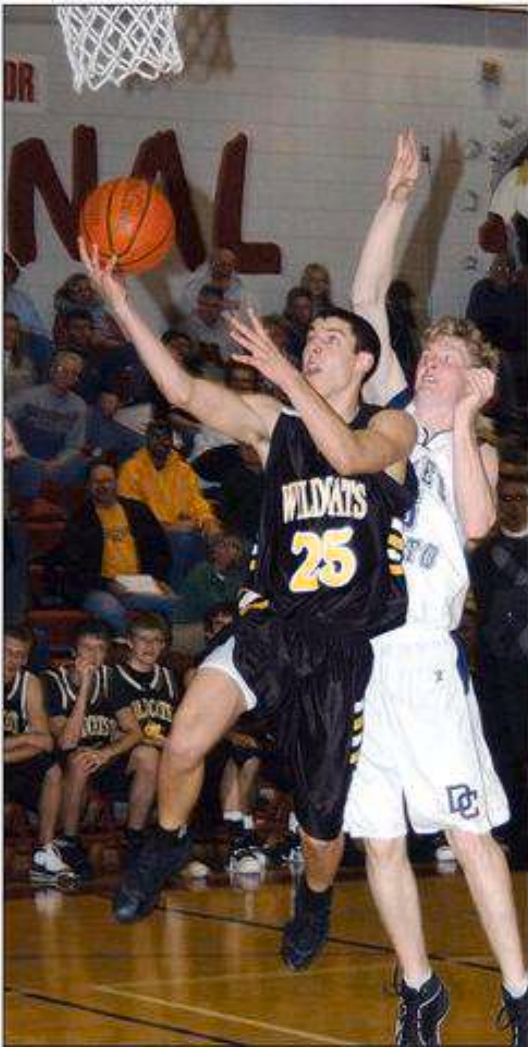
As a players’ coach, NLS head coach Matt Cordes was at the center of the Wildcats’ tight-knit nucleus. But he certainly didn’t earn that moniker from taking it easy on his players during practices.

Cordes: “In 2007, we’re in the section finals and we’re playing G-F-W. They were a pretty well-oiled machine. They were big and strong and physical. We played well and hung with them, but we just ran out of gas. And I remember leaning over to coach (Chad) Schmiesing and saying, ‘We will never run out of gas again.’ And we committed ourselves to not only covering the Xs and O’s and all that stuff, but really being committed to being in the best physical condition that we could be.”

Tengwall: “(Matt) wanted to be the best conditioned team on the floor night-in and night-out. One of his adages he always used was ‘put in work and get buckets.’ And we really filled that philosophy.”

Powers: “Matt knew what it was going to take for us to be as good as we could be. He conditioned us to be able to press a team all game long. He knew our strengths and was able to give us an offense that played to those.”

Tengwall: “Cordes was a very structured man and knew what he was doing. He’d always print out the practice schedule every day and put it on the gym door. We’d come into practice every morning before the sun was even up crossing our fingers that it wouldn’t be too awful.”



Cordes: “The kids were not always super excited about the conditioning, but I always tried to get them to realize this wasn’t a punishment. We were doing this so we’d have a confidence about us that we could play a little harder, a little longer than our opponent. It really had a wonderful impact on them, because with the amount of conditioning and weights and things that we had done, as they stepped on the court they already had this confidence that they’ve already worked harder than the other team.”

Wachter: “Matt, when he needed to be hard he was hard. But day-to-day, the ins-and-outs of the year, he was one of us. He joked around, he hung out with us, he acted like he was one of the players. Even going on to play college ball, it’s not something people see or I saw. You see a lot of coaches that are so focused on plays

and fundamentals that it’s strictly basketball. With what Matt brought, it was special. He was one of us.”

Tengwall: “What made us such a great team was he was a players’ coach. He was not only who we could go to on the basketball floor, but someone we looked up to off the basketball floor. He was a life coach almost. A lot of the principles he taught in basketball were transferable to our daily lives and us growing into young adults and into men.”

Strength in balance

What the Wildcats lacked in star power, they made up for in balance throughout the whole lineup. Under Cordes’ up-and-down, helter-skelter style of play, NLS averaged 78.1 points per game and reached triple-digits in a game twice. The athletic Wildcats loved to get out and run on the fastbreak while playing full-court pressure defense to wear down opponents.

Cordes: “We didn’t really have an MVP. Jordan Radel was probably our vocal leader. Powers had a ridiculously high basketball IQ and when you need a bucket, you throw it to the big kid. Each one of them had a unique role, but they bought into it. They bought into the team component.

We were lucky to have wonderful athletes that could get out and go. Our big kids, Wade and Chris Tengwall were very athletic and could get out and run. We had the advantage of being athletic, so we wanted to exploit that.”

Wachter: “Not only was Wade a defensive force when we needed him to, but we could go to him whenever we needed a bucket on offense. We had enough players on our team that could score so well that we didn’t always need him on that end, so he could sort of sit back and be our post presence on defense. But he was the go-to guy for a bucket a lot of times.”

Cordes: “And then we had Powers, who was typically on the back of our press and is perhaps the most gifted shot blocker I’ve coached. He could block shots with both hands, so he covered for a multitude of sins.”

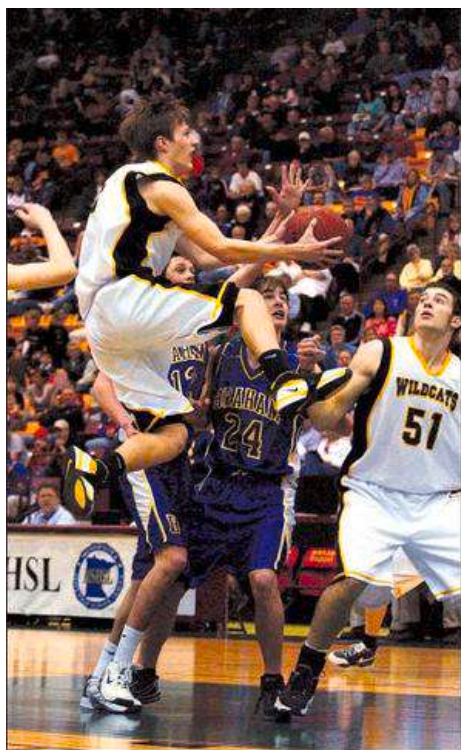
Powers: “I think my role was more of a defensive presence than offensive. I took a lot of pride in my defense and was kind of the anchor in the middle. My teammates knew that I was there and had their back if something was to break down.”

Wachter: “I don’t think I ever played with a player with his instincts and shot-blocking ability. He could block shots out of nowhere. Even in college ball, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

Powers: “Blocking shots was kind of just something that came with my game. Early on, I think my first game on B-squad as a ninth grader I didn’t score but I think I had like eight blocks. It was always one of the strongest points of my game.”

Cordes: “Chris Tengwall was about a 6-foot-6 kid, very long, very athletic. You could put him at the center of the press and he was a handful. Him and Wade were our high flyers. I don’t know if I ever coached a pair of guys that could dunk like they did.”

Tengwall: “I was kind of a run-and-gun guy. I lived in the paint and I could make my living on offensive rebounds and padding my stats, essentially. I could run the floor. I was a long, skinny, gangly kid that could run the floor and could jump. Wade was the center and I was the power forward.”



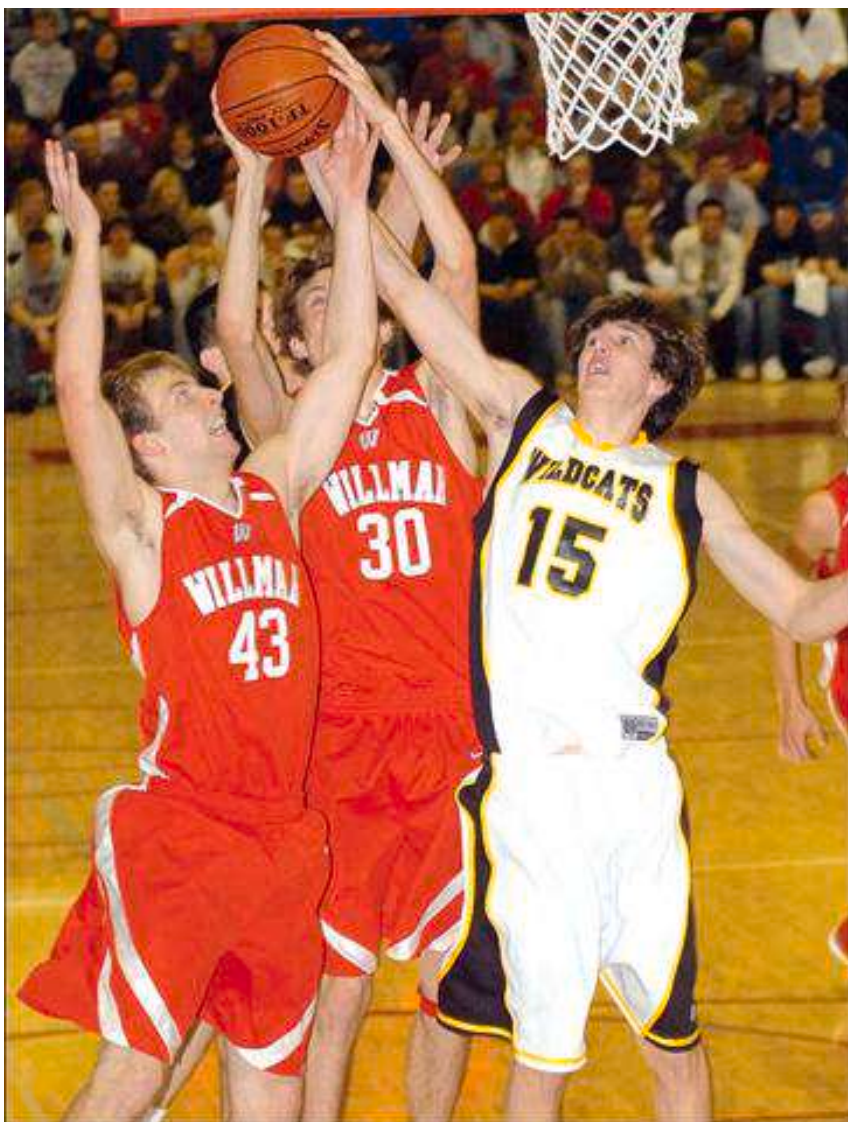
Wachter: “Me, personally, I would call myself a slasher offensively. I would drive the lane and try to find the open shot if I could. But if the defense would collapse, we had good shooters; we had really good shooters in Jordan (Radel), Jackson (Wright) and even off the bench. I knew if I drove it would break things down.”

Cordes: “If we could turn you over, we were going to score. We had some very gifted perimeter players like Erik Tengwall, who was a sophomore, Jay Moten and Jordan Radel. Those three alone were ridiculously athletic. Their lateral quickness was phenomenal. Their ability to anticipate was incredible.”

Going places

The Wildcats opened up the year 3-0 with three blowout wins over Litchfield, Benson and BBE. That set up a game at Rocori on Dec. 15 that saw the Spartans run them out of the gym. For Cordes, it was the perfect reality check and wake-up call for his players. Less than two weeks later, NLS looked to redeem itself in the Bremer Bank Holiday Classic against

Willmar in the Big Red Gym. Powers scored 28 points, Radel added 24 points and the Wildcats wore down the Cardinals, who would go on to take third at state in Class AAA, in a foul-filled, overtime contest.



Powers: “Willmar was a team that we would play every summer. It seemed like we played them in every tournament we went to, so we knew they were going to be tough -- especially playing up a class like that.”

Cordes: “We go into the Willmar game that night knowing we were going to have our hands full, but knew we could compete. The Willmar holiday tournament is just a wonderful event because it’s that first sense of a big game. There’s lots of people and everyone wants to see Willmar play New London. They were always sort of the big brother that you wanted a shot at.”

Wachter: “The tournament against Willmar was great. We knew they would be tough, we knew the kind of game they would play. What I remember from the game was terrible on my aspect. I couldn’t shoot, but I remember that my teammates were on a roll. That was probably one of our better performances as a team where we were able to package it all together offensively and defensively.”

Cordes: “We ended up going into overtime. I think four of their kids fouled out and two of our kids fouled out. It was a wonderful grind of a game and just too bad that anyone had to lose.

We ended up winning and everyone is excited then Coach Schmiesing says the quote of the year. He stands up in the locker room and said, ‘Okay, now we’re going places.’ It sort of became our mantra the rest of the season.”

Tengwall: “We were fired up after it, for sure. We had been rivals for a long time, growing up and such. And to beat them in the Big Red Gym was definitely one of the best games of the year. They were a class above us, and they even made it to state that year and took third, so they were good.”

Section play

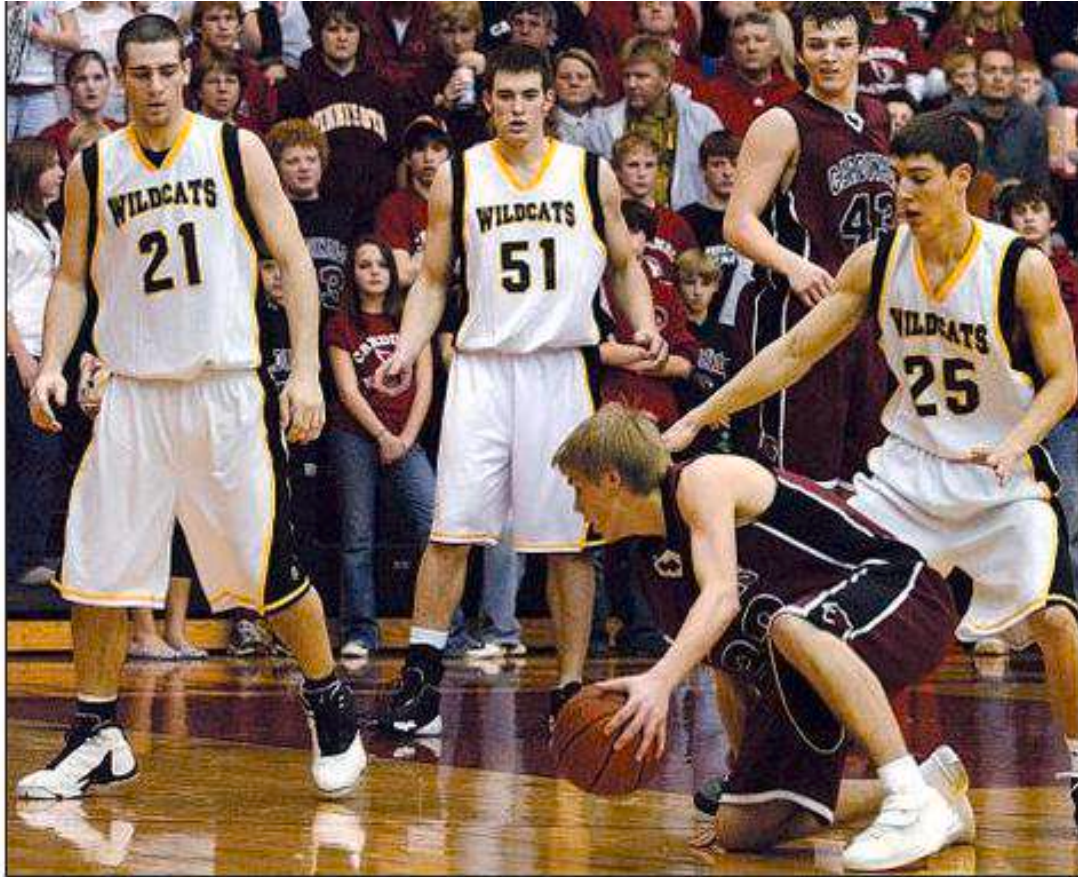
NLS took off after the win over Willmar, rattling off 23 consecutive victories to close out the regular season. Opening Section 6AA postseason play, the Wildcats dominated Holdingford and Paynesville. In the subsection final, Melrose gave the Wildcats a tough test in the third matchup of the year between the teams, but fell short of an upset bid, 56-49. NLS then delivered perhaps its best performance of the year in a 76-41 win over Staples-Motley, cutting own the nets en route to state.

Cordes: “We were headed to the section finals. At this point, Breckenridge was still left in our section, as was Staples-Motley. Breckenridge was a very good team and were going to have a handful with them because they

could match up with our size and similar in athleticism. We had spent a lot of time scouting and plotting them as if we were going to be seeing them. To our surprise, this team from Staples-Motley team pulled off a bit of an upset and so that's who we got."

Powers: "That game was the only time that Matt let us read into the 'experts' in the game. We were predicted to lose to them pretty big."

Cordes: "We go out and it might have been the best game we ever played. We jumped on them early and just throttled them."



Wachter: "From that prior year losing in the section final, we went into the game and went into it knowing it could be our last game and leave it on the line. Everyone was going to put everything we had into that game."

Cordes: "We ran this set play coming out of halftime, and it was a play to get an alley-oop dunk. It worked. Skylar Wachter threw the alley-oop to Tengwall and it worked to perfection. It was this wonderful message sent to Staples-Motley at that point of, 'You guys are in trouble.' It was scripted. That's how you should start a second half."

Tengwall: "That was one thing that made our team so special, was that chemistry and athleticism. Staples was caught off guard with that dunk and we sent quite the message with it."

Wachter: "I threw that alley-oop to Chris and he dunked it home. The energy from our fans and our bench and starters was just through the roof. Coming out after half and the alley-oop, we were just able to coast into the finish."

A game for the ages



The Wildcats opened up the state tournament with a 98-61 quarterfinal domination of Braham, leaving only Maple River standing between them and a shot at the title.

The Eagles, who had downed NLS rival Montevideo 64-53 two days before, were 28-1 and featured All-State candidate guard Seth Anderson.

What ensued was an all-time classic.

Powers: “That’s one that I don’t think anybody on our team or even in our school that was there will ever forget. It came down to the very end. It was one of those games that was tight the whole way.”

Cordes: “Going into that game, they were athletic but we were a little bigger. We figured that we could defend them to some degree. They had the coach’s son for them, whose name was Seth Anderson. He had this old-man rec game that was really good. His step-back, mid-range -- phenomenal.”

Tengwall: “Looking back on it, it was a very nerve-wracking game from the tip all the way until the final horn. I don’t know how many lead changes there were but it felt like it was going back-and-forth, back-and-forth.”



NLS trailed by as many as eight points early on, but cut the deficit to 28-27 by the end of a first half that saw Powers draw a technical and sit for the remainder of the half.

Cordes: “One of the big factors in the first half was Wade, who was always a bit temperamental, a call doesn’t go his way. He’s not necessarily frustrated at the officials, but he takes the ball and slams it on the ground. The rule is if that ball goes higher than your shoulder, it’s a technical. It does. He gets ‘T’d’ up. So I pull him out of the game, he’s in trouble, he’s sitting for the rest of the half. There’s tension and anxiety and angst in a team, but yet that’s really what we talked about: as a team, being able to persevere through those difficulties and come together, united.”

Wachter: “As seniors we liked to say that when things got tough then we got going. We rallied and collaborated together as a team and made our way through those tough times.”

The Wildcats came out of the locker room stronger and held their biggest lead of the game at 38-33, but the Eagles made a run right back to take a 45-44 lead with just over a minute left. Radel hit a pair of free throws and Wachter added two more points to give NLS a 48-45 lead. Just when it appeared

that, worst case, all Maple River could do was send the game into overtime, Eagles guard Logan Drager converted a four-point play with 13 seconds remaining. 49-48, Maple River.

Cordes: “We’re up three or four for most of the second half, but we’re not getting much separation. It’s a complete grind. We’re up one and there’s about a minute to go. We got an and-one. Wachter does his thing and we’re up three. It’s their ball.”

Tengwall: “And then they hit a three. And we foul them.”

Cordes: “We had really, really been working on contesting the 3-point shot. We really worked on taking an angle at them rather than jump right at them. They fire off a 3-point shot and we got a piece of it, so it was way short. So they get the offensive rebound, kick it back out for a second three and as Jackson Wright is running at the kid to contest, one of their kids shucks him a little and pushes him a little right into their shooter. Of course, they call it. He makes it, then he makes the free throw and now we’re down one with 13 seconds and some left.”

Wachter: “Matt called a timeout after the shot and we planned for worst case scenario -- that he was going to make the free throw and we’d be down one. He set up our play of going down and doing our pick-and-roll. He said, ‘Whatever’s there you take it.’ He put a lot of faith in us. He told us what he wanted and then left the rest up to us.”

Cordes: “We call timeout and we’re going to run a high pick and roll. I just want Jordan Radel to get to the rim and then I want everybody at the glass. Powers sets a high pick above the 3-point line, Radel comes right side, gets the layup at the rim and it comes off, but Powers and Tengwall are right there. Powers gets the putback, it goes in and we’re up one.”

Powers: “We were able to inbound quick after he made the free throw and Jordan Radel came down for the pick and roll. All that was going through my head was what Matt had pounded in my head earlier in the year: every time you pick, roll to the basket. I got inside near the basket and the shot rolled right off and, luckily, I was able to make a play on it.”

Cordes: “So we’re up one now. They inbound the ball to this superstar kid Seth. He goes the length of the floor. We don’t do a very good job of defending him. In that moment, you want to get in front of him and turn him, but half of the guys are celebrating and half are confused.

“The fog of war has set in. He goes the length of the floor and gets to about a little higher than the free throw line. I’m thinking that this is going in. His pull-up jumper is good.”

Wachter: “For me, I was already standing at that three-point line, almost at half court when Wade made it. So when they inbounded the ball, I was one of the first ones to step up. Anderson, when he comes up, the thought process came through from coaching and watching game tape was that he likes to do that pull-up jumper.”

Tengwall: “I stepped off of my guy underneath the basket to help out Skylar and he dished the ball to the kid I was defending with literally one second left. This kid had a layup.”

Wachter: “As soon as he passed it, I thought it was going to be a heartbreak loss for us.”



Cordes: “There’s a kid right under the basket. He dumps it to this kid. Powers steps off his man and somehow gets it at the buzzer. He pins it to the backboard. Glorious.”

Powers: “I have a big framed picture of the whole moment that was taken by one of the photographers there. It shows the whole floor and their fans behind it watching the block. It’s one of those things, when I watch the tape, it still gives me goosebumps.”

Tengwall: “It was a historic photo-finish block that I have sitting in my basement on a huge portrait. You can see the red on the backboard from the clock expiring and Wade’s hand is pressed up against the ball.”



Powers: “People have asked me what I was thinking at that point, but my mind was just blank and I was on autopilot at that point.”

Cordes: “Then the crew of refs decides that they’re going to review it. There’s only two reasons why they can replay, we’re told in the pre-state meeting: to see if it’s a 3-point shot or to see if the kid got the ball off at the buzzer. So the refs are going to replay it to see if the kid got the ball off at the buzzer, which doesn’t matter because it was blocked anyway. So I’m like, ‘What are you replaying?’ In my mind, you can’t look to see if that was goaltending or not. The ref didn’t say anything, he just said that they’re replaying it. The Target Center is just dead quiet. So I’m freaking out.”

Powers: “We were the last game of the day, so everyone from earlier was still there. It’s completely silent. There’s always the thought that creeps in your mind that’s going to scare you. So what was going through my mind was what I knew happened, but at a certain point you start to doubt yourself. Maybe it did hit the backboard first or whatever. I had this pit in my stomach that this wasn’t how I wanted to lose a game.”

Wachter: “In my head, I thought the game was over. Wade got the winning block, time expired and the game was over. You typically don’t get reviews in high school, so I remember watching it and standing at the scorers table with my teammates waiting for an answer.”

Cordes: “I wanted to vomit.”

Wachter: “Then I remember them bringing the coaches together and just praying for the best. As soon as Matt’s face lit up and he gave that fist pump, I knew it was going in our favor. We went crazy. We were onto the state final.”

Powers finished with a team-high 13 points and 13 rebounds to go along with five blocks. Wachter added 11 points and Radel scored 11 points while Anderson led all scorers with 22 points. The Wildcats were on to the state title game against a familiar opponent...

One more to go

The Wildcats were no David, but Crosby-Ironton was definitely Goliath. The Rangers entered the game at 32-0, looking to become the first undefeated state champ since Braham in 2005. Only three of their games all season had been decided by a single-digit margin. Led by point guard Bryce Tesdahl, Crosby had played -- and beaten -- NLS during multiple summer tournaments over the years.

The championship game was following that same path early on, as the Rangers methodically worked out to an eight-point lead with 6:55 left in the first half and held a four-point advantage at the break.



Wachter: “We were used to playing Crosby in the summer and they were really good. We’d faced them and they beat us by double digits. They were a physical team with two big post players. Their point guard, Tesdahl, if you let him get open space he would take over the game.”

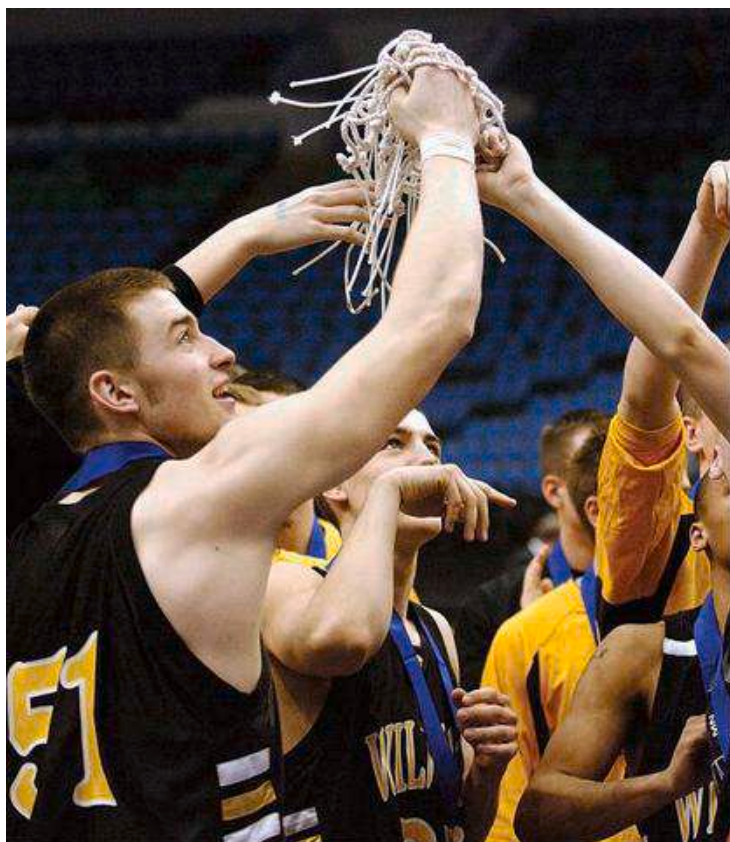
Cordes: “I thought we could compete, but at the same time we’d have to get lucky and things would have to go our way.”

Wachter: “The first few minutes of the game I think both teams kind of had that adrenaline rush going. We were kind of feeling each other out to see what was working, what wasn’t working, who was on their game who wasn’t. At half, we were sitting there silent at halftime and quiet and catching our breath. A couple coaches and guys stood up and said that we were right there. It’s right within our reach to take this game. It’s good to stay with them, but let’s go out and win it.”

Cordes: “We were down at half but were competing so I was encouraged. I was okay with where we were because not only were we able to score a little bit, but we were able to defend them decently. It was a low-scoring game.”

Tengwall: “We were happy with where we were at in this game, but there was still this lingering sense of ‘Oh, s---. I don’t know if we’re gonna win this game.’ They were a team we had played when we were kids and they really spanked us.”

Powers: “It felt to me like even though we were losing, we had control of the game. We just slowly chipped away at the lead. They had some very great players. We had to battle.”



Led by Wachter and, off the bench, Erik Tengwall, the Wildcats came out firing in the second half. Wachter had a game-high with 19 points and sparked an early run to give NLS the lead, which then flipped between the teams until the 10:07 mark when the younger Tengwall buried a jumper to put the Wildcats up for good.

Cordes: “Somewhere in that first half, Coach Schmiesing and I sort of figured out that if we ran a secondary break with a skip pass, then Skylar, a gifted slasher, could take his man off the dribble. Hopefully -- finally -- their defense would break down.”

Wachter: “Second half, it felt like we were clicking on every avenue. We were getting open shots, getting open layups. It seemed like everything was open.”

Tengwall: “We got out and ran the floor. We picked up our defensive intensity. We had our bench come out and really played well. My brother was the sixth man and he had a great second half. He came in and really made some noise for us. We had some guys step up to the occasion and make plays in times when we needed them.”

Wachter: “A big stretch for us was Chris’ younger brother, Erik, came in. He was an underclassman at the time. For him to come in and score six, seven points in a row was huge. He was able to give us some big help, to not just come in and us not lose anything but to actually gain some ground. We never looked back.”

Crosby-Ironton cut the lead down to three points with two minutes to play, but a Wachter layup and sound free-throw shooting clinched a 59-51 win for NLS. The five Wildcats senior starters contributed 48 points and 28 rebounds. Erik Tengwall added 11 points. Powers, Wachter and Chris Tengwall were named to the Class AA All-Tournament team.



Cordes: “We started gaining some confidence slowly. We started to exploit that and started to wear down Crosby, and eventually it turned our way. Lo and behold, between little Tengwall and Jordan Radel and Jackson Wright, they went 8-for-8 down the stretch from the free throw line, and that was it. Winner, winner, chicken dinner.”

Wachter: “Being on the court and watching those last 20 seconds tick down, and then Chris throwing the ball up in the air, we all just ran to half court and just jumped and celebrated as a team. It was one of the best feelings I’ve ever had.”

Tengwall: “It was pandemonium. I had always wanted to do this: I threw the ball up toward the rafters at the final buzzer and the overwhelming sense of joy and relief and happiness and victory was a lot. It definitely brought tears to my eyes. It was a pretty unreal feeling.”



Powers: “It was a huge flood of emotion. Something that we had worked so hard for, something we had worked harder for than anyone else in our lives. It was a big sense of pride bringing the first boys championship to New London. Our girls program, they’re winning all the time, but the boys program hadn’t had that success. To be able to bring that home to everybody was the coolest feeling.”

Cordes: “It’s one of those greatest feelings that you can experience. You get a little surprised with how joyous it is, but at the same time it’s a little sad because it’s over.”

Wachter: “It was the best feeling, just from everybody in the stands, seeing our family and friends. I looked into the stands and saw my mom bawling her eyes out after watching us from when we were little kids to now, reaching our goal.”

Tengwall: “This was our destiny as kids. It’s why we put all of those hours in the gym and all that time from our parents driving us to countless numbers of tournaments and practices year-in, year-out, all season long. It all culminated into that moment.

That was our goal we set for ourselves long before our senior year: state title or bust.”