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Recommended Citation
Liberty University, "Back on the mat: wrestling returns to Liberty" (2008). *January/February 2008*. Paper 2.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2008_jan/2

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Back on the mat: wrestling returns to Liberty

February 29, 2008 ¦ Eric Brown

The book of Genesis tells of an instance when Jacob wrestled with God until daybreak. The end of this physical battle left Jacob with an injured hip and a blessing from the Lord. For the Liberty University wrestling team, each match is physical, and like Jacob, the program is reaping the benefits.

In just its first year back after a 12-year hiatus, the wrestling team won the NCAA East Regional Qualifier, sending four competitors on to the national championship. Just one year later Coach Jesse Castro and his team have the privilege of hosting the qualifier for the first time in school history. However, with that honor comes a certain degree of pressure.

“We were the new team last year and we stepped in and won it,” said sophomore Chad Porter. “I’m sure we’re going to have a target on our back more so than last year.”

Coming out of high school nationally ranked, Porter brought much experience to a newly resurrected program. At a lean 165 pounds, the West Virginia native captured the East Regional title in his weight division, advancing to the NCAA Championships in his freshman season.

Three of Porter’s teammates, senior Christian Smith, junior Tim Harner and sophomore Patrick Walker also made the trip to Auburn Hills, Mich., for the national championships last season.

Even before his appearance at nationals last year, Smith was no stranger to being an NCAA qualifier. Before transferring to Liberty from Virginia Tech, the senior spent the first two seasons of his college career at Duke University. In his freshman season, Smith captured the ACC title at 125 pounds. Upon qualifying for nationals a second time, Smith earned the honor of Co-Most Outstanding Wrestler at the East Regional Qualifier in 2007.

“He’s our senior leader in terms of experience,” said Castro. “We are trying to petition for another red shirt year for him.”

Along with Smith, Harner also experienced success on the mat before transferring from Rider University. In his freshman year, Harner qualified for nationals and climbed as high as 17th in the national rankings. Now in his second season at Liberty, the junior notes a difference in this year’s competition.

“Last year I didn’t take nearly as many beatings as I did this year,” says Harner jokingly with a bruise under his left eye and his hand heavily wrapped.

Then there is Walker, a heavyweight who is undoubtedly the vocal and spiritual leader of the team. Although he may be listed as a sophomore, he is not an ordinary second year student. Prior to attending Liberty, Walker spent four years of active duty as an Army Ranger. During that

time, he was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan twice. His experiences in the military have more than prepared him for his role as a team captain.

“Heavyweights tend to have an aura about them as a leader. In terms of leadership he is irreplaceable,” said Castro.

When Liberty hired Castro as head coach in 2005, he immediately began setting goals for himself and the team. He saw the East Regional Qualifier as a feasible way to get his team to nationals. Although the road that lay ahead of him was a difficult one, Castro had plenty of experience in building a program.

Castro first came to Liberty in the late 70s, a time when the program was only a few years old. After becoming the first four-time champion in the National Christian Collegiate Athletic Association (NCCAA), Castro returned to his alma mater as an assistant coach in 1983. As an assistant, he helped the program achieve national recognition on the Division II level.

In 1988, Castro became a head coach at Norwich University in Northfield, Vt.

“We went from nowhere to 11th in the country in Division III in nine years with nine All-Americans,” said Castro.

From there Castro traveled to Woolwich, N.J., where he led Kingsway Regional High School to a state title in 1998.

Now back at Liberty, Castro and his latest team have made just as much impact off the mat as they have on it. Since resurrecting the program, five of Castro’s wrestlers have accepted Christ as their Savior. In addition to the spiritual growth within the program, the team held a Bible study with competitors from Oklahoma and Indiana University at the NCAA Championship last year.

“We sent out the invitation to the coaches if they wanted to come,” said Smith.

“Most of them that came were Christians or had some affiliation.”

As Liberty’s post-season approaches, this year’s squad hopes to vastly improve on last season’s performances. More importantly, the team desires to show its opponents the real reason for its success.

“The flesh part of you always wants to win,” said Walker. “I say that we can win with humility and pass that glory onto the Lord.”