College wrestling: Clackamas, fast becoming a powerhouse, eyes (another) national title

Rhoden_and_BornRegion18_championships.jpg

Clackamas head wrestling coach Josh Rhoden, left, and assistant coach Brett Born during the NJCAA Region 18 Championships in February, hosted by the Cougars. (Courtesy of Clackamas Community College)

Scott Bernard Nelson | snelson@oregonian.com

Follow on Twitter

on October 15, 2013 at 8:40 AM

To get a sense of the U-turn the Clackamas Community College wrestling program has taken since coach Josh Rhoden showed up on campus in 2006, just run your finger down a list of the team’s finishes at the NJCAA National Championships.

In the seven seasons BR – Before Rhoden – Clackamas finished 10th a couple of times at the national tournament, but even in those meets they were never a threat to any of the top teams. Most of the time, they were never even close.

In the seven seasons AJ – After Josh – the Cougars have finished in the top 8 every season. They won the national championship in 2011, finished third last year and have become a perennial threat to win it all.

What should worry other community college programs around the country is that Rhoden feels like he’s just hitting his stride on the Oregon City campus. He thinks this year’s recruiting class is probably his best ever.

“Our goals are high,” Rhoden says. “A national championship is what we talk about every day with this group.”

Oregon State assistant coach Kevin Roberts, who is familiar with the junior college ranks after being on the staff at North Idaho College for five seasons, says it’s incredibly hard to build a community college program like the one at Clackamas.

Some kids have a chip on their shoulder because they didn’t get a scholarship offer from a Division I or Division II school after a star high school career; others end up at a community college because they have academic or disciplinary issues. And unlike at a four-year school, where you’ll get an athlete into your program for four or (with a redshirt) five years at a time, junior colleges have to remake their rosters virtually every season.

“Every year you’re battling the kids who don’t think they should be junior college kids,” Roberts says. “Josh got in there and worked his tail off and sold them on it, and sold the college on it, and proved it could be a successful sport there. They’re doing all the right things.”
CJ Palmer of Clackamas, top, and Miguel Baltazar of Southern Oregon were both destined to be All-Americans last season. Palmer went on to finish fourth at the NJCAA Championships and Baltazar to finish sixth at the NAIA tournament. When they met Jan. 9 in an exhibition dual, though, Palmer beat Baltazar 13-2. (Southern Oregon won the dual 42-6.)

College wrestling: Clackamas, fast becoming a powerhouse, eyes another... http://blog.oregonlive.com/sports_impact/print.html?entry=/2013/10/clac... 2 of 4 10/15/2013 3:45 P

Andrew Stanfield does the public-address announcing at both Clackamas and Oregon State meets, among others. So he has seen plenty of college wrestling at all levels. He says junior-college wrestling doesn't get the credit it deserves in terms of how good the athletes are -- at least at top programs like Clackamas and rival North Idaho.

But Stanfield says the word seems to be slowly getting out to the local wrestling community -- helped by the 2011 national championship -- and he's seen attendance at Clackamas meets steadily increase over the last three seasons.

"The Cougars are just flat-out fun to watch," he says. "They put on a good show, with exciting and entertaining wrestling. Most duals have pretty good crowds now."

As for this year's team, Rhoden won't have to lean entirely on newcomers. He has several veterans returning after good seasons a year ago, led by CJ Palmer at 133 pounds. Palmer, from Pennsylvania, finished 18-4 in a season partially spent rehabilitating a torn labrum. He finished fourth at the NJCAAs, but Rhoden says he could've won it all if it hadn't been for the injury.

Stevan Knoblauch, out of Fresno, Calif., spent time in and out of the starting lineup last year at 125 pounds before losing the spot to Sage Ornelas, who went on to finish sixth at nationals and claim All-American status. Knoblauch went 23-10, but won't necessarily have an easy time claiming the 125-pound starting spot this year, either.

Kamron Day, from Fillmore, Utah, was 8-4 at 125 pounds a year ago before a knee injury ended his redshirt season. He's also back and looking good, Rhoden says.

At 141 pounds, Daniel Leonard from Sherwood went 24-10 at open tournaments while redshirting a year ago.

The team last year ended up with five All-Americans, including national champions Trent Noon at 174 pounds and Jacob Mitchell at heavyweight. But what Rhoden says he's most proud of is that seven members of that team signed to continue their careers with four-year colleges.

"Division I schools won't take kids without that (associate’s) degree," he says. "Our foundation is built from the education up. We’re going to be one of the top teams in the nation, but let’s make sure all our kids get degrees while they’re here."

Among the big names working toward those degrees and likely to contribute on the mat in this year’s recruiting class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCC home schedule, 2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 24, 7:30 p.m., Navy and Scarlet Exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 9, 5 p.m., Simon Fraser University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 6, 7:30 p.m., Highline C.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 18, 5 p.m., North Idaho College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Andrew Stanfield does the public-address announcing at both Clackamas and Oregon State meets, among others. So he has seen plenty of college wrestling at all levels. He says junior-college wrestling doesn't get the credit it deserves in terms of how good the athletes are -- at least at top programs like Clackamas and rival North Idaho.

But Stanfield says the word seems to be slowly getting out to the local wrestling community -- helped by the 2011 national championship -- and he's seen attendance at Clackamas meets steadily increase over the last three seasons.

"The Cougars are just flat-out fun to watch," he says. "They put on a good show, with exciting and entertaining wrestling. Most duals have pretty good crowds now."

As for this year's team, Rhoden won't have to lean entirely on newcomers. He has several veterans returning after good seasons a year ago, led by CJ Palmer at 133 pounds. Palmer, from Pennsylvania, finished 18-4 in a season partially spent rehabilitating a torn labrum. He finished fourth at the NJCAAs, but Rhoden says he could've won it all if it hadn't been for the injury.

Stevan Knoblauch, out of Fresno, Calif., spent time in and out of the starting lineup last year at 125 pounds before losing the spot to Sage Ornelas, who went on to finish sixth at nationals and claim All-American status. Knoblauch went 23-10, but won’t necessarily have an easy time claiming the 125-pound starting spot this year, either.

Kamron Day, from Fillmore, Utah, was 8-4 at 125 pounds a year ago before a knee injury ended his redshirt season. He’s also back and looking good, Rhoden says.

At 141 pounds, Daniel Leonard from Sherwood went 24-10 at open tournaments while redshirting a year ago.

The team last year ended up with five All-Americans, including national champions Trent Noon at 174 pounds and Jacob Mitchell at heavyweight. But what Rhoden says he’s most proud of is that seven members of that team signed to continue their careers with four-year colleges.

"Division I schools won’t take kids without that (associate’s) degree," he says. "Our foundation is built from the education up. We’re going to be one of the top teams in the nation, but let’s make sure all our kids get degrees while they’re here."

Among the big names working toward those degrees and likely to contribute on the mat in this year’s recruiting class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCC home schedule, 2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 24, 7:30 p.m., Navy and Scarlet Exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 9, 5 p.m., Simon Fraser University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 6, 7:30 p.m., Highline C.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 18, 5 p.m., North Idaho College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
College wrestling: Clackamas, fast becoming a powerhouse, eyes (another... http://blog.oregonlive.com/sports_impact/print.html?entry=/2013/10/clac...}

**Kyle Bateman, Sandy, 165 pounds:** An OSAA Class 5A and Reser’s Tournament of Champions titlist last season, Bateman raised eyebrows on the national level when he finished fourth in freestyle and third in Greco-Roman at junior nationals in Fargo, N.D., over the summer.

**Eleazor De Luca, Phoenix, Ore., 149 or 157 pounds:** De Luca won three OSAA Class 4A titles for Phoenix and a national Greco-Roman championship, and originally signed with Arizona State when he graduated in 2012. Instead, he ended up spending a year in the development program at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., and then showed up at Clackamas. But he clearly has designs on big things. De Luca recently tweeted, “I know for fact I will be an NCAA champion one day.”

**Brandon Johnson, Lake Stevens, Wash., heavyweight:** Johnson has big shoes to fill, both literally and figuratively. The Cougars have had an All-American heavyweight every year of Rhoden’s tenure, including NJCAA titles from Tyrell Fortune and Jacob Mitchell three of the last four seasons. With both now in the development program at the U.S. Olympic Training Center, it’s left to Johnson to pick up the mantle for the Cougars at 285 pounds. An undefeated 4A state champion in Washington last season, Johnson also finished 5th at folkstyle nationals in Virginia Beach, Va.

**Kenny Martin, Lincoln, Neb., 149 pounds:** Martin is a talent who had a less direct route to college wrestling than most. He finished second at the Nebraska state tournament as a freshman at Omaha North High School, then had academic and attendance issues that led him to two other schools and out of wrestling entirely for the next two years. Last year at Lincoln Southwest High – while living on his own with the assistance of homeless advocacy groups – he finally won a state title and finished as an All-American at freestyle nationals in Fargo for the second year in a row.

**John Morin, Hillsboro, 184 pounds:** After placing fourth at the state tournament as a junior, Morin took a wrestling cultural exchange trip to Africa and came back re-dedicated for his senior season. He lost a triple-overtime championship match at the prestigious Reno Tournament of Champions, then went on to win the Reser’s and OSAA titles before finishing 8th and claiming All-American status at folkstyle nationals. Morin, at 6-foot-3, looks and wrestles like former Oregon State 184-pounder Brice Arand, a 2011 NCAA qualifier who stands 6-foot-2.

**Ihoughwama Odigizuwa, Portland (David Douglas HS), 197 pounds:** The younger brother of UCLA defensive end Owamagbe Odigizuwa made his mark on the wrestling mat rather than the football field. Ihoughwama’s junior year was cut short when he didn’t make weight at the district tournament. So he moved up from 182 pounds to 195 as a senior and steamrolled the competition on the way to a state title and a third-place finish at folkstyle nationals in Virginia Beach.

**Lawrence Otero, Albuquerque, NM, 141 pounds:** A four-time finalist and three-time New Mexico state champion and a two-time folkstyle All-American, Otero was ranked as high as 13th in the class of 2013. He originally signed with Arizona State, but changed gears and ended up at Clackamas.

**Robbie Rizzolino, Easton, Penn., 141 pounds:** A two-time placer at the Reno Tournament of Champions – including a third-place finish last year – Rizzolino went 32-6 and placed sixth at state as a senior for Easton Area High...
Adrian Salas, Clovis, Calif., 184 pounds: Salas is a special kind of athlete. As a senior at Clovis, he went 42-1, won a state title and a Doc Buchanan Invitational title and recorded 22 pins as he led his team to a third consecutive state championship. He was also the Tri-River Athletic Conference player of the year in football. The website Calhisports.com named him the California Division I Boys’ Athlete of the Year.

- Scott Bernard Nelson

© 2013 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.