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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 4, 2009

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NCAA DIVISION III WRESTLING CHAMPIONSHIP PREVIEW

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA . . . The 36th Annual NCAA Division III Wrestling Championships are set for this Friday and Saturday, March 6-7, at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The two-day event, which features 160 wrestlers from 62 schools, is being hosted by Coe College, Cornell College, and the Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference.

Last year, Wartburg rode nine All-Americans, including three champions, to its sixth Division III crown. The Knights, who also had three runners-up in 2008, posted 147 points to outdistance Wis.-La Crosse (100), Augsburg (87), and Coe (78).

This year's field of 160 sports includes six returning national champions – Seth Flodeen of Augsburg at 125 pounds, Wartburg's Jacob Naig at 149 pounds, Wartburg's Aaron Wernimont at 157 pounds, Coe's Tyler Burkle at 165 pounds, Wartburg's Romeo Djoumessi at 184 pounds, and Dan Laurent of Wisconsin-La Crosse at heavyweight. There are 43 former All-Americans in the draw.

No. 1-ranked Augsburg captured the title at January's National Duals and has to be considered a favorite to capture its 11th NCAA title since 1991. The Auggies qualified a Championship-best nine wrestlers, including two who are top-ranked in the most recent NWCA/Brute-Adidas individual rankings – Travis Lang (133) and Willy Holst (149). Both are top seeds in this year's Championship. Of their other qualifiers, Seth Flodeen (fourth at 125), Tony Valek (seventh at 141), Jason Adams (third at 157), Zach Molitor (sixth at 174), Jared Massey (second at 197), and Andrew Witzel (eighth at 285) are all seeded.

Co-No. 2 Wartburg, runner-up to the Auggies at the National Duals, also qualified nine wrestlers. Of those, Aaron Wernimont (157) and Justin Hanson (165) are ranked No. 1 and are top seeds. A total of eight Knights are seeded, including seven in the top four. Mark Kist (seventh at 125), Matt Kelly (fourth at 133), Zach McKray (second at 141), Jacob Naig (second at 149), Romeo Djoumessi (second at 184), and John Helgerson (third at 285) were also awarded seeds.

Delaware Valley, the other co-No. 2, qualified only six wrestlers, but five are seeded in the top three. Returning All-Americans Mike Wilcox (184) and Kyle Bilquist are top-ranked and seeded No. 1, while Chris Scheetz (third at 125), Brandon Clemmer (third at 133), and Rocky Mantella (second at 174) also merited seeds.

Championship co-host Coe, ranked No. 4 nationally, brings seven wrestlers across town. No. 2 seeds Clayton Rush (125) and Brandon Ball (133) lead the way for the Kohawks, while defending national champion Tyler Burkle (fifth at 165), Rob Kramer (seventh at 197), and Mitch Sander (seventh at 197) also received seeds.

No. 7 Ithaca and No. 9 Wisconsin-La Crosse each qualified seven wrestlers for the Championships, as did No. 16 Luther. Seth Ecker (fifth at 125), Willie Horwath (eighth at 157), and David Priest (fourth at 174) are seeded for the Bombers, while Matt Mauseth (fourth at 149), Josh Zabel (fifth at 184), Andy Moore (eighth at 197), and Dan Laurent (second at 285) have secured seeds for the Eagles. Zac Bartlett (sixth at 133) and top-ranked Alec Bonander (first at 197) are the only Norse wrestlers with seeds.

No. 11 Heidelberg University and No. 12 United States Merchant Marine Academy (six each) were the only other teams to qualify over half their lineups for nationals. Each of the four qualifiers for No. 17 Saint John's University is seeded as are all three wrestlers from No. 22 Johnson & Wales.

Adding to the local flavor, No. 14 Cornell College has four qualifiers and No. 15 University of Dubuque and No. 30 Loras College have three wrestlers each. Nick Nothern (eighth at 133) and Kyle Kehrli (fifth at 174) are seeded for the Rams, while Dubuque wrestlers Josh Terrell (fourth at 165), Evan Brown (eighth at 174) and Matt Wonderlin (sixth at 197) were awarded seeds. Erik Hanson (sixth at 157) is the only Duhawk wrestler with a seed.

Weight-by-Weight

125 – Jake Oster (Elmhurst) and Rush (Coe) are the top seeds, but defending national champion Flodeen (Augsburg) has also been ranked number one this season. Flodeen (2x), Oster (2x), Rush, and Chris Scheetz (Delaware Valley) are returning All-Americans from a year ago. Oster (23-0) is the only undefeated wrestler at this weight, having given Rush (23-1) his only defeat at the Wartburg Desert Duals in December. Rush and No. 7 seed Mark Kist (Wartburg) could meet in the quarterfinals in a rematch of their Iowa Conference championship match, won 5-4 by Rush last month.

133 – Lang (Augsburg) has been the top-ranked wrestler at this weight all season and is the highest returning placewinner (fifth) from the 2008 Championships. There are five returning All-Americans at this weight. Nothern (Cornell) placed sixth a year ago and looms as potential quarterfinal opponent for Lang. A rematch with Mogi Bataar (Saint John's) could also be in the cards for the semifinals. Bataar, an All-American at 125 last year, handed Lang (31-1) his only loss of the season in finals at the NCAA Great Lakes Regional. For that matchup to materialize, though, Bataar would need to get through Matt Kelly (Wartburg) in the quarterfinals. Kelly was an All-American at 141 last year. Bartlett (Luther), seeded sixth, is the only returning All-American in his half of the bracket.

141 – Austin Bautista (Wis.-Whitewater) and Zach McKray (Wartburg) have been the top-two ranked wrestlers at this weight all season and are the only two former All-Americans at this weight. Bautista (36-1), who placed seventh last season, has not lost to a Division III opponent all season, with his lone defeat coming to Andrae Hernandez of Division I Indiana. McKray (25-3), who was eighth at 133 in 2006, has two Division III losses this season, both to Bautista.

149 – No. 1-seed Willy Holst (Augsburg) has been the top ranked wrestler at this weight most of the season. His only loss came to Esai Dominguez of Division II Nebraska-Omaha. Defending national champion and 2006 runner-up Jacob Naig (Wartburg) makes a strong case as a No. 2 seed, winning the Iowa Conference title and posting a 21-2 record. His only defeats are a pair of 3-point losses to Holst. There are three other returning All-Americans in the field. No. 3 seed Paul LeBlanc (SUNY Cortland) is 26-2 this season with both losses coming to Kellen Bradley of Rutgers at the Binghamton Open Nov. 15. He was seventh last season and fourth at 141 in 2006. No. 4 seed Matt Mauseth is 24-4 this year after placing sixth in 2008. Tyler Branham (The College of New Jersey) placed eighth at 141 in 2007 and would meet Naig in the second round with a first-round win.

157 – Wernimont (Wartburg) is the defending national champion and No. 1 seed. The winner of 76 consecutive matches, he has been atop the rankings all season. Last year's runner-up, Jason Brew (Olivet), is 40-3 with two losses coming at the Midlands Championships. Jason Adams (Augsburg) is the No. 3 seed, moving up after placing second at 141 pounds last season. He is 35-5 with two losses to Wernimont. No. 4-seed Andrew Goldstein (Gettysburg), eighth at 157 pounds last year, sports a 24-0 mark and could face fellow All-American Jesse Milks of Wis.-Platteville in the quarterfinals. Milks (18-1) was sixth last year. Luther's Yonny Quist, an All-American at 149 a year ago, is unseeded after moving up to 157 late in the season. He had been ranked fifth at 149 in the most recent rankings.

165 – Justin Hanson (Wartburg), who took seventh at last year's meet, has been the top-ranked wrestler and is the No. 1 seed in a field that has six returning All-Americans among its eight seeds. He is 32-2 with losses to No. 3 seed Ben Youel (North Central) and No. 4 seed Josh Terrell (Dubuque). Last year's national runner-up, Ben Hoover (Maranatha Baptist) is 20-2 with losses to Hanson and Youel. Youel, fourth last year, is 36-3 with a pair of losses coming to Hoover. Terrell (20-6) was fourth at 157 pounds last season. Defending national champion Tyler Burkle (Coe) is seeded fifth. His 23-6 record includes a loss to Ryan Morningstar (Iowa), three to Hanson, and two to potential quarterfinal opponent Terrell. No. 8 seed Justin Bonitatis (TCNJ) is looking to improve on last year's eighth-place finish. He enters the tournament at 35-1. Michael Morin (Southern Maine), the No. 6 seed, is the only undefeated wrestler at this weight at 36-0.

174 – Undefeated and top-ranked Jerome Owens (Johnson & Wales), eighth at this weight a year ago, is the No. 1 seed, entering with a 29-0 mark. Rocky Mantella (Delaware Valley) is also undefeated at 27-0 and holds the No. 2 seed. Two-time All-American Kyle Vanderhyde (Olivet) is the No. 3 seed, followed by David Priest (Ithaca) and 2007 All-American Kyle Kehrli (Cornell).

184 – Michael Wilcox (Delaware Valley) and Romeo Djoumessi (Wartburg) met in last year's championship match and are the top two seeds for this year's tournament. Wilcox (33-2) is the top seed over Djoumessi (9-1), the defending national champion and two-time All-American, on the strength of a win by fall during a dual meet at the end of January. Three other returning All-Americans are in the field. Coincidentally, each is seeded in the place they finished last year's championship. No. 4 seed Gabe Youel (North Central) was fourth a year ago, followed by No. 5 seed Josh Zabel (Wis.-La Crosse), and No. 6 seed Bryan Lenhardt (Johnson & Wales). Phil Moenkedick (Concordia-Moorhead) is 32-0 and seeded third.

197 – With 18 qualifiers, 197 ranks as the largest field at this year's Championships. Alec Bonander (Luther) is 19-2 with his only two losses coming to Division I competition at the Midlands Championships. Jared Massey (Augsburg) is the No. 2 seed with the only blemish on his 26-1 record coming from Al Meger at Division II Augustana (S.D.). No. 7 seed Rob Kramer (Coe) was fourth a year ago, while No. 5 seed Anthony Neumann (Concordia-Moorhead) was eighth. Last year's sixth-place finisher, Josh Holforty (Wis.-La Crosse), is unseeded and will meet Bonander in his first match.

285 – No. 1-seed Kyle Bilquist (Delaware Valley) has made a steady rise through the rankings this season, posting a 28-3 record in 2008-09 after finishing fifth a year ago. Defending national champion Dan Laurent (Wis.-La Crosse) is the No. 2 seed, while fellow All-Americans Glenn Geesman (MIT) and Mark Corsello (Elmhurst) are seeded fourth and fifth, respectively. Laurent enters the championship at 35-5, while Geesman is 37-2 and Corsello 27-7. No. 6-seed Brock Glotfelty (McDaniel) sports the best record in the weight class at 34-1.