



University of Wyoming Wrestling Cowboy Tough

2011-12 Wyoming Cowboy Wrestling Outlook

Pokes feature good blend of senior leadership and up-and-coming talent

LARAMIE, Wyo. (Oct. 3, 2011) – After one of the most successful seasons in recent memory, Wyoming wrestling coach Mark Branch and the Cowboys look primed to make an even bigger splash this season.

The overall outlook

"We have high expectations every year, but I think this year we have a lot of reasons to feel good about the potential of the season," Branch said. "We like a lot of things about our team but I think the most exciting part is our senior leadership and the strength of our seniors and the fact that we're complimenting that with a lot of new faces. We have a very new, different team.

"We're looking at the program as a whole. When I think back to my first year here, the expectations of this program weren't near the level they are now. The culture had to change. These young kids have stepped into a culture that guys like (seniors) Michael (Martinez), Shane (Onufer) and Joe (LeBlanc) have helped create. They understand what we expect. Wrestling is a priority, and we want them to be dedicated year-round. They are very motivated and put in the extra time. We were trying to teach that, and these kids have come in and seen it as an example. We haven't had to try to drill it into their heads. It's been a neat process to watch them, to sit back and see how motivated and competitive they are.

"That's the biggest game-changer in our room, the level of competitiveness. I remember begging my first year for guys to show emotion in the practice room. Now, kids care. They get mad if they get beat. To see those things come to fruition and to see the culture we've been wanting, to me, that's the biggest sign that this program is going in the right direction."

The returners

After taking home two All-America honors and a 28th-place team finish from the NCAA Championships, the Pokes return some serious talent to the mats this year. The big names returning for Wyoming include seniors Joe LeBlanc and Shane Onufer, both of whom finished with All-America honors in their respective weight classes. LeBlanc was sixth in the nation at 184 pounds, while Onufer staked his claim to fifth among 165-pounders.

The other NCAA qualifiers who will compete this season are senior Michael Martinez (125), Patrick Martinez (174) and L.J. Helbig (197). Martinez went 2-2 in the NCAA Championships, and was two wins away from All-America status.

The departures

The Cowboys said goodbye to four seniors from last year's team, including NCAA qualifier Cole Dallaserra (149). Jack Tennant and Matthew McLaughlin, both of whom wrestled at the heavyweight level, graduated, along with Shane Doughman (133).

Stepping up

Expect some new faces to make an impact this year, as 10 redshirt freshmen are on the roster. Redshirt freshmen Dan Crook (285), Dakota Friesth (157), Mike Hamel (141), Brandon Richardson (149) and Zach Zehner (133) could be in contention for starting spots among Wyoming's 10 weight classes.

The six true freshmen on the team include Alex Baca (125), Austin Breckenridge (149), VJ Giulio (184), Tanner Harms (285), Jace Jensen (174) and Sean O'Leary (125). They likely will redshirt, due to the great depth the Cowboys have this season.

"Our team, depth- and strength-wise, can afford to redshirt those kids," Branch said. "For the last several years, we didn't have a choice because we were trying to put out a competitive team.

"We have a lot of guys that don't have a lot of experience, but they can lean on the upperclassmen who have tons of experience. Bringing these young kids in underneath a great group of upperclassmen, we're hoping that leads to some instant success for those young guys. We need those young guys to really step up and be mature. I think about this group of seniors we have, they came in, they didn't have anyone to show them the ropes. We're hoping that helps the young kids progress a little quicker."

Regional Training Center

The University of Wyoming wrestling program announced its wrestling club had been certified as a regional training center by USA Wrestling. Known as the Cowboy Wrestling Club, the program already had been established as a charter wrestling club by USA Wrestling. The Cowboy Wrestling Club is based out of the UniWyo Sports Complex. The certification allows Olympic hopefuls at any age group to train in Laramie to compete in international competitions.

Branch said the distinction of being named a regional training center shows that UW is trying to grow wrestling at all levels, but specifically that "we're serious about the Olympic movement."

"It shows we have big plans for the future," Branch added. "We're going to be equipped to keep those kids here and train full-time. It can be a real big benefit to have those guys as a part of our program."

USA Wrestling has worked with the top collegiate programs in the country to establish regional training centers on campuses across the nation. It's part of a broader goal to help the US in international competition.

"We hope to take the kids that we're producing, and when their college careers are over, give them the opportunities they need to compete for world and Olympic teams," Branch said. "It's a collective effort across the country to really strengthen American wrestling."

Wyoming had to endure an application process in order to receive the status, including having USA Wrestling-certified coaches in the program. The move also allows Wyoming Wrestling to work closely with the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"First and foremost, our priority is to provide opportunities for our graduating seniors," Branch said. "It definitely is going to give us a lot of exposure to athletes and also give us the opportunity to give exposure to our program and coaching staff and athletes to the



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country.”

The Wyoming Regional Training Center is one of 16 sites throughout the nation.

The schedule

Fans of traditional powerhouses in collegiate wrestling will have the opportunity to see several teams in Laramie, as the Wyoming wrestling program announced its schedule for the 2011-12 season.

The UW home slate will feature teams like Oklahoma State, Oklahoma and Cal Poly, and Western Wrestling Conference foes such as Utah Valley, Northern Iowa and Northern Colorado.

Wyoming also will hit the road for several prestigious events, like the Las Vegas Invite, the Reno Tournament of Champions and the National Duals in Stillwater, Okla.

“I think we found a good balance of competition. We weren’t really looking to make any major changes,” Branch said.

The tournaments

The tournament season starts in Powell, Wyo., for the Northwest College Open on Nov. 5. UW then will host the Cowboy Open in the War Memorial Fieldhouse on Nov. 12, and head to the Kearney Open in Kearney, Neb., on Nov. 19. The Pokes then travel to Nevada for two tournaments, the Las Vegas Invite (Dec. 2-3), and head to the Reno Tournament of Champions on Dec. 18.

The dual season

The dual season for the Cowboys begins when they travel to Nebraska on Dec. 10. The home opener for the Pokes will be Jan. 1, when they host Oklahoma State for the second time in four years. Two days later, Oklahoma will visit Laramie. Those duals are scheduled to take place in the Arena Auditorium.

“The fact that we can get tradition-rich programs like Oklahoma and Oklahoma State to make the return trip is big. That’s not easy to do,” Branch said. “But the fact we’re able to bring that type of level of wrestling to Laramie is outstanding for fans and our program.”

The last time the Cowboys hosted Oklahoma State, the dual took place in the AA to allow access to more fans of Wyoming wrestling. With both Oklahoma State and Oklahoma coming off impressive performances at the NCAA Championships last year, interest for those duals should be robust.

“We definitely want to promote (those duals) and get the fans thinking about them early,” Branch said. “Hopefully, we can break some attendance records in wrestling. With those types of teams coming in, I think it’s a great opportunity for us to do some special things. From a fan’s perspective, this schedule has never looked better. From our perspective, it’s never been tougher but that’s what we want. We want those kinds of challenges. It’s definitely a good mix.”

After the home openers, UW will travel to Corvallis, Ore., to battle Oregon State on Jan. 15. Then it’s back home for the first of three straight home duals, starting with Cal Poly on Jan. 20. The conference season begins with Utah Valley on Jan. 21, and Northern Iowa on Jan. 29. It’s off to the Air Force Academy for the next event, a dual on Feb. 2 in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The Cowboys then will host Northern Colorado on Feb. 8 before traveling to the National Duals on Feb. 12. The Pokes will wrap up conference dual competition on the road, when they take on South Dakota State (Feb. 16) and North Dakota State on Feb. 17, both on the road.

“We put ourselves in competitions that we want to be extremely challenging,” Branch said. “We don’t put ourselves in anything that we don’t believe we can win. We have high aspirations and we put ourselves in an extremely tough schedule for a reason. “I’ll probably always say if we ever go undefeated and win everything on our schedule, I made some major mistakes as a coach. That doesn’t mean we don’t believe and expect to win every event that we enter.”

The postseason

The WWC Championships/NCAA West Regional will be March 3 in Cedar Falls, Iowa, hosted by Northern Iowa. The NCAA Championships are March 15-17 in St. Louis.

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