

State champ happy to be wrestling again

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 16 January 2012 21:02 -

Zach Witte has a three-inch scar and a big lump on the side of his left wrist, visual reminders of a broken bone that cost him the first six weeks of the wrestling season.

The inside doesn't sound too pretty either.

"There's a wire and there's two pins in there," he said Monday before practice at Prairie High School. "They're going to stay in there permanently, unless it bugs me and we'll take them out."

Wrestlers are tough customers and they don't come much tougher than Witte, who was an undefeated state champion at 145 pounds last year as a junior.

Witte returned to action this past weekend at the Geneseo (Ill.) Invitational and captured the 152-pound title with two pins and a major decision.

"I felt fine. It felt natural," he said.

Witte broke a bone in his left arm during the football season, but he kept playing (naturally) and had surgery in November. He had his left arm in a sling when he signed a national letter-of-intent in November with Northern Iowa and was hopeful of wrestling again in December, but he wasn't cleared until last week.

"After the surgery I didn't realize how long it was going to take for the soreness to go away," he said. "It's still sore and it's probably going to be sore all season long, but it's not to the point where it was a couple of weeks ago."

Witte was happy with his conditioning for the Geneseo tournament, considering he hadn't wrestled in so long.

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"It wasn't too bad," he said. "After a week of wrestling (in practice) I felt like I was right into shape. It wasn't like I was out of share. I was running and doing all the things I could. But wrestling shape is a whole different kind of being in shape."

Prairie Coach Blake Williams liked what he saw from his state champ.

"He looked a little sluggish that first match (a 16-6 major decision), but then as the tournament went on it seems like he got better and better," Williams said. "I wasn't worried about his arm or wrist at all. I was worried about his shape and everything.

"It didn't seem to be a problem, at least in that tournament. He looked fresh, he looked ready to go and just as sharp in the third period as he did in the first. That's a good thing.

"It was good for him to get some work and I think he realizes the competition will start getting a little tougher than the ones he had there (in Geneseo). But he was excited to be back. He obviously makes a big difference to the team, there's no doubt about it."

Witte felt a little rusty at times.

"On my feet I felt fine," he said. "On top it was a little slow, but I'm getting there."

More than anything, he was happy to be back in the lineup. He hated sitting around and watching while his teammates and buddies had all the fun.

"It was miserable," he said. "I really wanted to get back out there. It felt good to be back out."

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The fourth-ranked Prairie Hawks topped 10th-ranked Waverly-Shell Rock for the team championship at Geneseo, 232.5 points to 207, with Witte, Josh Wenger (113), Austin Gould (182) and Andrew Netolicky (220) winning titles.

"Anytime you can beat a quality team like Waverly-Shell Rock, that's a good thing," Williams said. "It was big, there's no doubt about that. I'm not sure if they had everybody (wrestle) or not, but it was just a good win."

Prairie hosts No.8 Linn-Mar in a key Mississippi Valley Conference dual meet Thursday night. It will be Prairie's only single dual of the season, with no other teams involved. Prairie and Linn-Mar are both approaching full strength after battling injuries.

"We're looking forward to having a great meet Thursday night. I think it should be a great atmosphere," Williams said.

Witte likes the way his team is shaping up.

"I feel as a team we have very good potential to do something amazing at state duals," he said. "We have a tough team and a very determined team as well. We've been working hard for a long time. I think this could be a good year for us."

Witte has won 41 straight matches since the start of his junior campaign and is trying to become a two-time undefeated state champion. He's gotten a late start this season, but the enforced layoff means he has a fresh body for the important part of the year.

"It could be a blessing in disguise," he said. "We'll see when state comes around."