

Cougar matmen hope to do more with less

Written by Jim Ecker

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Cedar Rapids Kennedy wrestling coach Brent Paulson hopes to accomplish more with less this season.

The Cougars have approximately 33 wrestlers on the team, compared to their normal allotment of 44 or 45, but there could be strength in smaller numbers.

Almost all the guys on this year's team have wrestled before, whereas in the past Paulson might have 13 guys in the practice room who had never wrestled before. Many of those inexperienced wrestlers would lose interest and quit, which means the Cougars would end up with roughly 33 guys anyway.

Now they're starting with 33 and could stay at 33, and all of them have worn a singlet in anger before. "That's encouraging," said Paulson, starting his ninth year as head coach.

With experienced wrestlers, the learning curve isn't as steep and the coaches can work at a faster pace.

"I'm very confident with the kids we have on the roster, I don't think I'll lose anybody," Paulson said. "You like the big numbers, but at the same time the kids we have in the room are pretty focused on getting better. So you kind of take the good with the bad, I guess."

Speaking of good, Luke Kremer will be seeking his fourth straight trip to the Class 3A state tournament after placing third at 135 pounds last year with a 41-4 record. He's aiming for the new 132-pound class this year as a senior.

"He's got two steps to go to get to the top," Paulson said. "It's pretty clear what his focus is."

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Ryan Rodriguez qualified for the state meet last season at 140 and finished with a 28-13 record. Rodriguez and Ben Feuerhelm, another experienced wrestler, probably will fill the 138 and 145 spots, but it has not been determined in which order.

Taylor Moss, who qualified for state as a freshman in 2009, is back after battling a broke hand last year. "He's got the determination and heart," Paulson said.

The Cougars have another experienced wrestler with J.D. Ruzicka. Dalvin Dixon competed at heavyweight for Kennedy last year, but he'll have to trim from 320 pounds to 285 to make weight.

"If he gets down to 285, I think for sure we'll have a full lineup," Paulson said. "He has a great attitude about it."

Paulson tabbed Linn-Mar and Cedar Rapids Prairie as the top wrestling teams in the Metro area. "I think we can be in the mix," he said. "I'm excited to get going and see what we have."

Kennedy finished 17th at the state meet last season. Ryan Sheldon, who placed fifth at 171 pounds last winter, is now wrestling at Coe College.