

J-Hawk grapplers double their pleasure

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Jefferson wrestling team has doubled in size since last season, growing from 25 guys on the squad to about 50.

Thank you, Conner Herman. And thank you, Matt Orton.

Herman won the Class 3A state title at 215 pounds last year as a senior, spurring interest in the program. Orton won a state title for the J-Hawks in 1989 and is now one of the assistant coaches.

"I think the success that Connor had last year helped us bring some attention to the team," said Dick Briggs, beginning his 29th year as head coach. "And two, I think bringing Matt Orton in as a coach on the staff has also been a real draw for the kids. He's a very magnetic guy."

Orton joined the staff last year and helped Herman reach the top step of the awards stand in Des Moines. In fact, Herman saved his biggest hug for Orton after capturing the state title and said he couldn't have done it without him.

Herman and the Jefferson girls who finished first at the state track meet in the 800-meter relay were honored during an assembly at the school last spring. "Recognizing their success and hard work really helped bring attention to the sports," Briggs said.

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The wrestling program has twice as many kids on the team, but the J-Hawks are twice as green. "We're as green as the grass in the spring," Briggs remarked.

Approximately two-thirds of the 50-man roster are freshmen and sophomores. There are only a dozen experienced wrestlers, and all three of last year's state qualifiers graduated with Herman, Riley Welsh and Blake Carson no longer around.

"We'll be a work in progress. We'll have our hands full, but the kids are bringing the right attitude," Briggs said.

Jefferson begins the season Thursday night in Cedar Falls with a double-dual against the City High Little Hawks and Cedar Falls Tigers. The J-Hawks will return to Cedar Falls on Saturday for the Keith Young Invitational.

The J-Hawks are green, but Griffin Bollman, P.J. Rashed and Michael Moncivais all came within one match of reaching the state tournament last year. Tyler Boesenberg, Mic Vesey and Brandon Leary also have tasted success. Bollman, Boesenberg, Vesey and Leary are seniors.

"It's a nice senior group," Briggs said. "We have a couple of nice freshmen coming in, too, that we're excited about who've had a lot of opportunity to wrestle."

Briggs mentioned Kelly May and Luke Sedlacek as two freshmen to watch this season.

Briggs anticipates putting a full lineup on the mat this season, with no forfeits in any of the 14 bouts.

"I think right now we have more bodies for every weight class. We'll fill them all," he said. "I think we'll be competitive, considering who we are. Hopefully our seniors will see some success that they've been looking for the last four years, and then our youth will start a new trend."