

Prairie grapplers feature 7 state qualifiers

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Prairie wrestling team had a good season last year with a state champion and six other grapplers who reached the state tournament in Des Moines.

This year could be even better.

All seven of the state qualifiers are back, although 145-pound state champ Zach Witte begins the year on the disabled list with a broken arm. He hopes to return in a few weeks.

"Knowing that seven guys have gotten a taste of it, that's a great thing," Coach Blake Williams said.

Andrew Netolicky, who finished sixth at 189 pounds, is back for the Hawks. So are Jayden Flege, Chris Walters, Zach Becicka, Cameron Rathje and Peyton Wagner, all of whom needed only more victory to climb the awards stand in Des Moines.

"If they had won that match they would have placed," Williams said. "Hopefully they're hungry to get on the stand."

Trey Blaha did not qualify for the state meet last year, but he had a solid season and fell short in a tough district. He gives the Hawks another strong wrestler. "He's probably hungrier than anybody," Williams said.

Williams said his experienced wrestlers have improved since the end of last season.

"I think so," he said. "They're sure of themselves. I think everybody is stronger and bigger and more experienced and even hungrier. Even the guys who weren't down there (at the state

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meet)."

Prairie has 59 wrestlers on the team this season, and Williams said there's been stiff competition for spots in the starting lineup.

"We're probably as deep as we've been, numbers-wise," said Williams, beginning his ninth year as head coach. "That brings out the best in people, and there are some weights that are going to be hotly contested.

"It's a matter of everybody making themselves better. I think it will, in the long run."

Prairie was scheduled to open the season Thursday in a double-dual with Kennedy at Waterloo East, but the meet was postponed until Dec. 20 following the death of Kennedy assistant coach Jeff Clark. The Hawks will start the season Saturday at a tournament in Independence.

Witte broke a bone in his left arm during the football season and will miss a few meets. He has a doctor's appointment on Tuesday to see if the cast can be removed. In the meantime, he's trying to get ready for the season.

"He's doing everything he possibly can with a cast that goes above his elbow," Williams reported. "He does a lot of drilling and keeping his shape up.

"I know he's antsy to get back into it. Every day I see him doing more and more. Sometimes we have to tell him to stop."

Witte has signed to wrestle at the University of Northern Iowa next season. Williams won't rush him back into the lineup.

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"He's got a bright future in college, no matter what happens this year," Williams said.

"Obviously he wants to win it and repeat (as state champion), but there are bigger and brighter things in his future."

The Hawks finished 12th in the team standings at the state tournament last winter. Williams thinks the team is capable of cracking the top-10, but is not ready to reveal team goals.

"We just want to do what we need to do before that and get better every week," he said. "By the time conference and districts come around, hopefully we're at our best."

"We just want to get as many guys down there (to the state meet) and get as many guys on the awards stand as possible. We want to see how high we can get, but there's a lot of stuff before that."