

Eastside Going for Title Number Seven

Jim Baxter

SCVarsity.com Publisher

There is blood in the water in the Class 3A wrestling ranks heading into the 2009-2010 season. While the Eastside Eagles have dominated the ranks for the past six seasons, bringing home six consecutive state titles, the Eagles face a big rebuilding year after graduating two state champions and three placers. But the prospect of a rebuild doesn't seem to faze head coach Jack Kosmicki, as he looks forward to the challenge ahead.

"I'll be honest with you," said Kosmicki, "every year I think we're rebuilding. Seriously, each year we graduate some great wrestlers and the mind wants to say 'man, what are we going to do without those guys' but there are always kids who step in and make it happen for us."

The Eagles lose two state champions to graduation in **Eddie Coles** and **Austin Poynter**, as well as three other placers. But they return some solid talent in the way of seniors **David Dawkins** and **Mateo Rojas**, who were both state runner-ups in the 160 and 171 weight classes respectively; they also return **Rodney Hicks**, who finished third and **Beija Canova**, who placed 4th in the 103 lbs division. Add to that several another qualifier and several who missed qualifying by one match and you've got the foundation to build on.

Looking at all of that, it appears that it may be more of a "reload" than a "rebuild" for Kosmicki. But he knows their work is cut out for them.

"There are some very good teams out there," said Kosmicki, "and we know we've got some work ahead. But we don't really look at long term goals early on, you just can't do that. That's not how you keep your program rolling."

So how does Coach Koz, as everyone knows him, keep the program in championship form? While other teams jump right into the off-season workouts and load their schedule up with freestyle tournaments all spring and summer, the Eagles take a little more relaxed effort.

"Our first two or three months, the first days after the season," said Kosmicki, "are kind of laid back. We don't do a lot of wrestling or mat work. We don't talk about it, we don't do it. We take a break. When the time comes, we start lifting and running to get stronger and stay in shape. If we do any mat work at all, it's more of an open mat thing - more instruction than anything else. But we lift and we go to camp and we may install some new things that we learn at camp. But that's it."

Kosmicki is adamant that the key to the success of the Eastside program has been the commitment of the kids to excellence and the tremendous coaching staff that is assembled.

"Those guys - the assistants - make it easy. We've got a great staff. They all have different styles and personalities and that makes it easier for the wrestlers. Not all athletes respond to the same style of coaching so we find the right fit with each kid and assign those kids to a certain assistant coach. Heck, I just kind of make sure it's all running on time."

Another big help is the feeding system that Eastside takes advantage of. Because Greenville County has no middle school wrestling programs, the junior high wrestlers are able to participate in the JV program. That means, the kids who want to wrestle for Eastside come in as 7th graders and Koz has them on his mats for six years with no bad habits to break when they get to the varsity level. There is also an AAU program that instructs wrestlers from 4 years old to 12 years old.

Wrestlers coming into the Eastside program learn the team philosophy and some of them are able to break into the lineup as freshmen. But they never have unrealistic expectations placed upon them.

"We want our young wrestlers to learn that we approach our entire season from a dual meet philosophy," said Kosmicki. "We want them to know we can have success as a team if they can go out and not get pinned and give up points. That's what we want them to accomplish early. As they mature and get better, the winning will come. But this is about the team."

So, with the rest of 3A foaming at the mouth at the possibility of a weaker roster, what are Koz's expectations?

"Look, I'd love to have number 7," he said, referring the 7th consecutive state title. "But we don't talk about that until three days before it happens. What my expectations are is to know what we need to work on and get that done - correct our deficiencies. If we can do that, we can be successful. It's up to these kids and how hard they want to work. We know they can get it done if they are committed; we've done it before with what looked to be weaker returning rosters."

So, for his 15th year as the head coach of Eastside and embarking on a year that could see the Eagles win a seventh consecutive state title, Koz said he wants to borrow the motto of the Pittsburgh Penguins' season from this past year - "You hold the pen...what story will

you write?" That is what he wants his wrestlers to take to heart. And if they accept the daily challenges that are placed before them in this program and achieve the goals that they each write for themselves, Coach Kosmicki may be able to take that pen and title his story "Seven."