

2003-2004 SEASON COLUMNS by Don Shaffer

Young Guns

Call them ... "The Young Guns."

Prone to mistakes? Well, sure ... sometimes.

Talented? Oh yeah.

Dangerous? You better believe it.

Perhaps fielding one of the youngest teams in school history – a combined nine freshmen and sophomore starters – the Reynolds Raiders and coach Brian Hills recently closed an outstanding 2003-04 campaign.

"This team accomplished some pretty amazing things when you consider how young they are," Hills said. "I think as the season went on these kids grew up pretty fast. I think they showed great maturity and performed at a consistently high level."

As a team, the Raiders were ranked as high as No. 19 in the country by "Amateur Wrestling News."

They won Section, District and Regional team titles and finished third at the state tournament, just 1-1/2 points out of first place. They also won the Mountaineer and Tool City tournaments, while placing fifth at Manheim and seventh at Ironman.

"We entered the Section tournament with only two seniors in the starting lineup. I'm very excited about the next couple of years. Obviously, I think we have great potential with this group," Hills said.

If the Raiders' inexperience did hurt them this season, it rarely showed as six Raiders qualified for the PIAA Class AA Championships and four returned home with medals.

Seniors Travis Battles (second at 152) and Nick Sommerfeld (runner-up at 189) each wrestled the final match of their high school careers in the state finals.

Battles (42-4) ends his remarkable career as a three-time state place-winner with an overall record of 133-29. That ties him with Steve Popovitch for sixth place all-time in terms of career wins. Sommerfeld (37-5) caps an outstanding career with two state medals and a mark of 117-35. He is tied with assistant coach John Tofani for 11th place on the school's all-time win list.

Senior Jake Habel (17-5) also reached the magical 100-win plateau this season but was unable to crack the starting lineup for the post-season tournaments. He is a four-year letterman, a past state qualifier and settles in at 14th in all-time wins with a 105-32 mark.

Sophomore Matt Dunn (112) was third at states and Lawrence Beckman (140) was sixth. Dunn, a state champion as a freshman, bounced back from a surprise quarterfinal loss to win four straight bouts and earn a bronze medal. He finishes the season with a school record 43 wins. He is an incredible 83-5 in two seasons.

Beckman (39-7), just a freshman, wowed the Hershey crowd with his showing at the state tournament. He was a state semifinalist and beat the fourth-place finisher in the regional finals. Junior Jason Brown and freshman Aaron Nestor also wrestled at the state tournament.

Brown posted 30 wins this year and is now 80-45 in three years as a starter. Nestor, younger brother of past Raider stars Justin and Jason Nestor, went 25-9 in a standout debut season. He was 1-2 at states.

Eight Raiders won Section titles – Paul Kulka, Dunn, Mason Stewart, Aaron Nestor, Beckman, Battles, Sommerfeld and Mike Edwards - as 13 of 14 starters advanced to the District 10 tournament.

Four more were first at Districts – Dunn, Beckman, Battles and Sommerfeld – as 10 Raiders earned the right to wrestle at Regionals.

Dunn, Beckman and Battles won Northwest Regional crowns while junior Ryan Foust, sophomores Edwards, Stewart and Kulka as well as freshman Stephen Nestor all were Regional qualifiers.

Foust was undoubtedly the Raiders most improved wrestler from one season ago. As a sophomore he went 2-12 wrestling mainly at 171 pounds. This season he jumped up to heavyweight and improved his record to 23-15 picking up many key wins along the way.

Edwards, a 10th grader, put it all together in the post season and came within one point from advancing to Hershey. He closed the season at 28-14 and is now 52-27 in his two-year career.

Kulka, a sophomore, wrestled most of the season at 103. He finished the season 20-6 - and like Edwards - was fourth at Regionals, just missing a trip to Hershey.

Stewart (125) was slowed by a knee injury late in the season or also may have made a serious run at becoming a state qualifier. In fact, he beat Northwest Regional champion Andrew Jones of Greenville in a dual match. Still, he was a Regional qualifier and finished 29-11. He is 60-24 in two seasons as a starter.

Freshman Stephen Nestor (119) was a Northwest Regional qualifier despite not being a full-time starter until the season's mid point. He finished 13-10, despite wrestling against some of the state's best wrestlers.

Here's a quick look at some of the Raiders' other regulars:

Freshmen Jon Uhrin (17-15 at 160 pounds) and Travis Sommerfeld (7-22 at 171) both qualified for the District 10 championships as freshmen and look to be strong in coming years. Junior David Chaney saw limited action at 145 pounds. He was 1-2 at Sections and had a 2-6 overall mark.

Also contributing to this year's success were senior Nate Glaser (11-6) and sophomores Josh Tofani (3-4) and Sam Kulka (0-2). All three were spot starters and drew tough assignments.

Reynolds cruised through the regular season undefeated for the 14th time in school history. They won their 31st Mercer County Athletic Conference championship along the way. The team suffered its only setback to eventual state runner-up Fort LeBoeuf (32-29) in the D-10 Duals finals.

The Raiders were the only team to beat state dual match champions Bloomsburg, that win coming at the Ultimate Duals in Brookville. Reynolds also beat Loyalsock at the Ultimate Duals. Loyalsock, meanwhile, went on to win the team points title at the state tournament.

Not too shabby for a bunch of kids who don't have their driver's licenses yet.

"Coming into the season, we knew we were going to be young, but, we also knew these young kids were very talented," Hills said. "You never know how things will transpire as you go through a season ... so many things can happen. Looking back, I'm happy with all we were able to accomplish."

"I think it was just an outstanding season," Hills said.

RAIDER RAP - Junior Eric Campbell missed almost the entire season with a knee injury. He did return late in the year and wrestled several junior varsity matches and one varsity match. ... Though he will not win four state titles, Dunn is still on track to win four District and Regional crowns - a feat that has yet to be accomplished by a RHS wrestler. ... Edwards is on pace to win four section titles. ... Sommerfeld was a three-time Section champion. ... Members of the varsity team who did not make it out under the spotlight included senior Joe Jordan, juniors Sam Resinger and Adam McDowell, and sophomore Josh Burns ... Reynolds' all-time dual match record now stands at 548-69-2. ... Coach Hills' record is now 236-31-1. ... The Section team title was the 34th in school history. Reynolds won Districts for the 12th time and Regions for the 8th time. ... Here are the updated all-time post-season numbers: 215 section champs, 94 D-10 champions, 46 Regional champs and 66 PIAA place-winners ... Stephen Nestor was among 15 Reynolds wrestlers to qualify for the All-Area Junior Olympic state tournament.