

2004-2005 SEASON COLUMNS by Don Shaffer

Pre-Season Column

There is no shortage of optimism as the 2004-05 Reynolds wrestling team prepares for the upcoming season. A group of nine returning letter-winners will join forces with an outstanding freshman class to once again make the Raiders one of the best Class AA teams in the state of Pennsylvania.

"The way things have turned out, we could end up being even younger than we were last year," said head coach Brian Hills.

Hills, however, was quick to point out that being young is not necessarily a bad thing, especially considering the success of last year's team. Last season the Raiders came within a point-and-a half of winning a team title at the PIAA Class AA Championships and were ranked as high as No. 17 in the country by Amateur Wrestling News. All that with a lineup that featured as many as nine freshman and sophomores.

A pair of PIAA runner-ups - Travis Battles and Nick Sommerfeld - are gone from last year's team but four state qualifiers - Matt Dunn, Lawrence Beckman, Jason Brown and Aaron Nestor - return. They will bond with other strong performers like Ryan Foust, Mike Edwards, Mason Stewart, Paul Kulka and Stephen Nestor to form the heart and soul of this year's team.

"We lost a couple of studs (Battles, Sommerfeld and Jake Habel all had more than 100 career wins) but we've got some real good talent coming back," Hills said. "The funny thing is, the way things have shaken out, we may only have two seniors in our starting lineup again, just like we did for the postseason last year."

Dunn, a state champion in 2003 and third place finisher in 2004, is arguably the best of the bunch. He is on pace to do some incredible things in his high school career. His two-year varsity record stands at an eye-popping 83-5.

The good news for Reynolds fans is that he won't have to do it alone.

Beckman emerged last season as one of District 10's best wrestlers despite the fact he was only a freshman. Like Dunn, he won Section, District and Regional crowns while finishing sixth in the state at 140 pounds. His overall record was 39-7 with 17 pins. He'll be counted on for big things this season.

Aaron Nestor, a sophomore, and Brown, a senior co-captain, also wrestled at the 2004 state tournament. Brown, with 80 career wins is on pace to become a member of the prestigious 100-win club and will look to prove that last season's PIAA berth was not a fluke.

Nestor (25-9) turned a lot of heads as a freshman and really heated things up in the post season to advance all the way to the state tournament where he posted a 1-2 mark.

Foust, Edwards, Kulka, and Stewart were all Northwest Regional qualifiers and will look to build on their success. Foust, a senior and the team captain, was one of the squad's most improved wrestlers last season. He carded a 23-15 mark, after going just 2-12 as a sophomore. He and Edwards, a junior with a 52-27 career record, will flip-flop between 215 and 275 pounds.

Kulka, a junior, will likely bump up two weight classes from 103 where he posted a 20-6 mark last season and just missed a trip to Hershey.

Stephen Nestor posted a deceiving 13-10 mark a year ago, often facing the opposition's best wrestler. Although he did not crack the starting lineup on a full-time basis until the season's mid way point he placed 6th at Districts.

Stewart was slowed by an injury in the post season but still rolled his way to a 29-11 record. The two-time Regional qualifier has 60 career wins, including 40 by fall.

"These are the guys we were really counting on," Hills said of his returning letter-winners. "We need them to be steady for us all year long while the younger kids improve."

Junior Sam Kulka will start the season at 171 pounds. He was 0-2 at the Ironman Tournament a year ago, but posted a promising 7-2 mark in junior varsity action.

Freshmen Brandon Maun, Ryan Dawes, Corey Brown and Michael Miller will likely be called up to fill holes in the Raiders' starting lineup. While inexperienced, all have had outstanding junior high careers.

"Our junior high and elementary coaches do such a great job of preparing our younger wrestlers, Hills said. "We've been very fortunate through the years. These kids are ready to go when they step up to the varsity level. We help them make some adjustments; but, they know how to wrestle."

A rash of pre-season injuries has limited the Raiders' overall depth as three wrestlers – senior Eric Campbell and sophomores Jon Uhrin and Travis Sommerfeld have been lost for the season All three likely would have seen considerable varsity time but instead have had season-ending surgery. The three wrestlers have won a combined four varsity letters.

"It will hurt us in a sense that we will not have the depth that we would have like to have had," Hills said. "No question we are going to have to depend on some of our freshmen to step up and compete right away. I have confidence in these younger kids. I think they'll step in and do a goo job."

"We certainly cannot afford any other injuries," Hills added.

The projected starting lineup for the Raiders at this weekend's Phillipsburg Tournament: Wrestlers are listed by weight class, name, grade, last season's record and career record.

103 - Brandon Maun, fr., 0-0, 0-0.
112 - Curtis Reynolds, fr., 0-0, 0-0.
119 - Paul Kulka, jr., 20-6, 21-6.
125 - Corey Brown, fr., 0-0, 0-0.
130 - Matt Dunn, jr., 43-4, 83-5.
135 - Mason Stewart, jr., 29-11, 60-24.
140 - Stephen Nestor, so., 13-10, 13-10.
145 - Aaron Nestor, so., 25-9, 25-9.
152 - Jason Brown, sr., 30-15, 80-45.
160 - Lawrence Beckman, so., 39-7, 39-7.
171 - Sam Kulka, jr., 0-2, 0-2.
189 - Mike Miller, fr., 0-0, 0-0.
215 - Ryan Foust, sr., 23-15, 25-27.
275 - Mike Edwards, jr., 28-14, 52-27.

Mid-Season Column

Some notes and ramblings from the first half of the 2004-05 season:

Let's start by congratulating junior Matt Dunn, who picked up career win No. 100 Wednesday night (1-13-05) in the Raiders' 65-3 win over Sharpsville. Dunn, who scored a first-period fall, appears to be on track to win somewhere between 160 and 170 high school matches.

"I think it's quite a feat that Matt is able to reach 100 wins half-way through his junior year," said head coach Brian Hills. "Barring anything unforeseen, he's on pace to do some pretty amazing things."

Dunn is the 15th Reynolds wrestler to reach 100 wins. The current school record for most wins is owned by Justin Nestor (153), who is wrestling at the University of Pittsburgh with junior eligibility.

Up next for the "100-Win Club" appears to be senior Jason Brown (17-6) who won match No. 97 vs. the Blue Devils. Brown has been a model of consistency over his high school career, winning 24, 26 and 30 matches in his first three seasons. He will likely reach 100 wins at the Brookville Ultimate Duals ... more on the Duals later in this column.

Brown also has a chance to get his name in the school record book in another category, as the individual to have wrestled the most career matches at RHS. The current record is 166 and is held by Justin Hollobaugh. Brown came into the season with 125.

Don't be surprised to see junior Mason Stewart make a run at 100 wins before the season is done. Stewart entered the year with 60 career W's but already has a team-best 21 this year and should have a shot at winning 40.

COMING OUT PARTY - Sophomore Steve Nestor may have turned in the best performance of his young career at the recent Tool City tournament. En route to the 125-pound title, Nestor, who was unseeded, defeated the No.1, No. 2 and No. 4 seeds.

In what may be the understatement of the year, coach Hills was quoted as saying, "Steve seem to be settling into the weight class."

"Steve made the commitment to get down to 125, a weight class where he is able to compete very well," Hills said. "Even though he placed fifth at Manheim, he really wrestled well down there. At Tool City, they didn't show him a whole lot of respect in the seedings, so we challenge him to step up. Once he beat the top seed he just sort of took over the number one slot."

As an added bonus, Nestor tied for the tournament lead with 19 takedowns in four bouts. He was one of five Reynolds wrestlers to win titles, being joined in the winner's circle by Dunn (130), Stewart (135), Aaron Nestor (140) and Lawrence Beckman (152).

The Raiders walked away with top team honors with 223 points, about 70 more than runner-up General McLane. In all, 12 of the 14 Raiders entered in the tournament placed in the top six.

ULTIMATE DUALS – The next red-letter day on the Raiders' schedule appears to be a stop at the Brookville Ultimate Duals on Jan. 21-22. The Raiders will wrestle five dual matches over two days, including three against state-ranked teams.

Hills & Co. open Friday with Port Allegany (District 9) at 5 p.m. and follow that up with a 6:30 p.m. bout against Northwestern Lehigh (D-11).

On Saturday, the Raiders open at 10:30 a.m. with Northern Lehigh (D-11), continue with a 3:30 p.m. bout against Mifflinburg (D-4) and then close it out with a 7 p.m. clash with Mount Pleasant (D-7).

Current Class AA rankings show Reynolds at No. 1, Fort LeBoeuf second, Northern Lehigh third Burrell fourth and Northwestern Lehigh fifth. Mount Pleasant is ranked 9th. Northern Lehigh and Northwestern Lehigh recently tied in a dual match with Northern Lehigh winning on criteria.

Hills also noted that the Raiders face a tough Grove City squad on Wednesday, leading up to Brookville.

EDWARDS WINS MANHEIM – The fact that Mike Edwards won the recent Manheim Lions Holiday Wrestling Tournament is a very good sign for the Raider junior.

A majority of the Raiders' other Manheim champs were state champions, with the only exceptions being Kevin Drew and Steve Popovitch. Drew was a state runner-up his junior year before being injured as a senior and Popovitch, a two-time state place-winner, finished as high as fourth.

Jonathan Hazi was a two-time Manheim champ for RHS, the only Raider to accomplish that feat while Casey Taylor, Justin Nestor and Mark Bodo are the only others to bring home the shiny Manheim plates.

I AM ... IRONMAN – Edwards and Dunn helped add to the Raider mystique when they became the first RHS matmen to reach the ASICS Ironman finals.

Both lost heart-breaking decisions in the finals, Dunn in overtime to the No. 1 ranked wrestler in the country and Edwards by a single point, in the final 10 seconds. Earlier in the tourney, Edwards had knocked off the tournament's No. 1 seed.

All-in-all, the team made a very respectable showing, finishing eighth (out of 32 teams) with four place-winners.

DUAL MATCH, NO PROBLEM – The Raiders have dominated their six dual match opponents so far this season, with rival Greenville being the only team able to hold the Raiders under 50 points.

In chalking up wins over Lakeview, Sharon, Derry, Greenville, Slippery Rock and Sharpsville, the Raiders are averaging nearly 60 points per outing.

ONLY TWO HOME MATCHES REMAIN – As the Raiders begin gearing up for the post season local fans have only two more chances to see the team in action on the home Blue & Gray mat.

The Raiders will host long-time rival Hickory on Jan. 26 before inviting Coach Rick Wherry and the Mercer Mustangs in for a Mercer County slugfest on Jan. 28.

The Mustangs are having an outstanding season and are considered one of the top teams in District 10. They are led by state ranked Braden Bice (275).

SECTION SHUFFLE – Only in District 10 can you have three wrestling Sections but only two Sectional tournaments. The recent announcement of this so-called "re-alignment" has caused quite a stir in Northwestern Pennsylvania.

The new format calls for a "North" and a "South" Sectional, with the top five from each tournament advancing to the District 10 Championships.

"I guess the one thing that really bothers me about this is that no one (D-10 coaches or athletic directors) was ever asked for input," Hills said. "This is something that was done at an administrative level and we were never asked to comment. There are a lot of things about this new system that I do not like."

Schools scheduled to compete in the 13-team South include: Reynolds, Greenville, Cochran, Sharon, Sharpsville, Grove City, Lakeview, Commodore Perry, Slippery Rock, Mercer, Hickory, Jamestown and Kennedy Catholic. The tournament will be held Feb. 18-19 at Sharon High School.

District 10's remaining 14 Class AA schools will compete in the North Section at Union City High School.

The big loser appears to be the wrestlers; there will now be two less wrestlers at each weight for the D-10 tournament. That's a total of 28 less District 10 Class AA qualifiers.

The big winner here appears to be Cranberry, who opted out of District 10 and obtained membership in District 9. Looks like a good move for the Berries, who likely would have been entered in the South Section.

Regular Season Column

Friday night's 45-21 win over the Mercer Mustangs puts an exclamation mark on a perfect 14-0 dual match campaign. It marks the third time in four seasons that the Raiders have finished the regular season undefeated and the fifth time, overall, for head coach Brian Hills.

"This team is blessed with outstanding veteran leadership that has gone way beyond expectations this season," Hills said. "That surrounded by the newcomers, that have blossomed greatly, have made our success."

Hills said the Raiders now look forward to the start of the so-called second season.

"We hope to continue that success throughout the post season. At the beginning of the season we had somewhat of a doubt in our mind - losing two returning starters from last year due to injuries suffered during football season," Hills said, adding, "that has been more than dismissed as the freshman that moved up have wrestled beyond expectations. We are extremely pleased with this year's edition and now have our sights set higher."

Reynolds now has 15 undefeated seasons.

RAIDERS PICKED FOR DUALS - For a record seventh straight time, the Raiders have been selected to participate in the District 10 Class AA Dual Match Championships.

Reynolds is the tournament's second seed behind defending champion Fort LeBoeuf, also unbeaten in the regular season. Interestingly, the Raiders are ranked No. 1 in the state in most Class AA polls, while the Bisons and head coach Paul Cousins are ranked second.

Reynolds will face D-10's third-seed, Saegertown, in the opening round at 5:30 p.m. Feb. 2 at Edinboro University of Pa.'s McComb Field House. Fort LeBoeuf will square off with Grove City on the adjacent mat. The two winners will meet in the championship match immediately following.

Several changes to this year's post-season tournament will take affect, the first being that the top two teams in District 10 will both advance to the PIAA Dual Match Championships. The winner will get a bye into the quarterfinals, while the loser will be forced to wrestle in earlier rounds and would have to win five matches to be crowned state champion.

Also, wrestle-backs have been added to the PIAA team format (with the exception of pigtail- round losers) meaning teams with one tournament loss can now wrestle back for third place.

To access the PIAA wrestling brackets, visit www.piaa.org

MOST POINTS, ONE MATCH - The Raiders established a new school record for most points in a dual match on Wednesday, Jan. 26 when they blanked the Hickory Hornets by a 80-0 count.

The Raiders scored 10 falls, one technical fall, received two forfeits and won a decision. The previous mark was set last season in a 78-0 win over Sharpsville.

Remarkably, it is the 39th shutout in school history.

The Raiders of 1973-74 boast a school record four shutouts and did not give up more than 17 points in any one dual match. Certainly an impressive feat. Raiders teams in 1965-66 and 1966-67 had three shutouts each. Each of those three squads were coached by the legendary Neal Lineman.

Teams of the 1970's have more shutouts than any other decade with 15 in a 10-year span. The blanking of Hickory is the 12th shutout by a team coached by Brian Hills.

BROWN BAGS 100 - As expected, senior Jason Brown won his 100th career match at the Brookville Ultimate Duals.

With a career record of 80-45 coming into the season, Brown currently stands at 105-51. He is a returning PIAA qualifier and a four-time letterman.

He becomes the 16th Reynolds wrestler to reach 100 wins.

BROOKVILLE WRAP-UP - The Raiders showed they are worthy of their No. 1 state ranking by rocking and rolling their way through some heavy-duty competition at the annual Brookville Ultimate Duals.

Among the Raiders' five victories were wins over a trio of state-ranked squads - Northern Lehigh (36-26), Northwestern Lehigh (38-17) and Mt. Pleasant (43-17). The Raiders also defeated Port Allegany (41-20) and Mifflinburg (56-9).

Among the highlights of the weekend were the performances of junior Paul Kulka (119) and sophomore Steven Nestor (125). Both defeated several state-ranked wrestlers while going 5-0. Jason Brown, Matt Dunn, Mason Stewart, Lawrence Beckman and Aaron Nestor also were undefeated in five bouts.

Steve Nestor's match in the finale against Mt. Pleasant's Lee Vanella would have to be classified as an instant classic. Nestor won the match in double-overtime ride-out, hanging on to the foot of Vanella despite a seriously injured lip. He came off the mat a bloodied mess - but more importantly - a winner.

With the five wins, Reynolds' all-time mark at Brookville improves to 17-7.

RAIDERS RANKED NATIONALLY - The Raiders are ranked No. 29 in the country, according to the most recent posting by Amateur Wrestling News.

The Raiders have appeared at various spots throughout the season, climbing as high as No. 14 at one point.

Individually, junior Matt Dunn is ranked No. 9 at 130 pounds.

This national exposure is a tremendous boost to the club. A good bit of the team's much-deserved recognition has come thanks to their participation in the Ironman Tournament. Dunn was a runner-up there, losing in overtime ride-out.

You can access the national rankings directly at www.amateurwrestlingnews.com

UPDATING THE NUMBERS - This would as good a time as any to update some of the Raiders all-time numbers.

Thanks to this season's 14-0 record, Coach Hills now boasts a career coaching record of 250-31-1. Not too shabby, especially when you throw in his 13 state champions. (Hopefully this number will be updated in a few weeks, too.)

The school's all-time dual-match record improves to 564-69-2. That's a winning percentage of .891, the best among Pennsylvania high schools with 500 or more wins.

MADE TO BE BROKEN - With all the success that the Raiders have had in the past 44 seasons, it is surprising to be reminded that the team has never won more than 15 matches in a season.

That mark appears primed to fall in the coming weeks. Please note the 1980-81 team that won 15 matches also was undefeated.

Team captains that year were Mike Dudley and Glenn Clark. Clark went on to coach at Penn Hills High School before starting the varsity program at Mars Area High School in Butler County.

This year's Mars team qualified for the WPIAL Class AA Dual Match Championships for the first time in school history. Fittingly, this year's group of Mars seniors were freshmen during Coach Clark's final season.

He was killed by a drunk driver in 2002.

Wrap-up Column

For fans of the Reynolds High School wrestling program, the 2004-05 season has truly been an excellent adventure.

The Raiders recently completed one of the most successful runs in school history by winning their fourth PIAA Class AA team points championship as six of a school-record nine state qualifiers placed in their respective weight classes.

Even with a perfect record in the regular season and a second place showing in the state team duals, the Raiders still managed to save a little something special for the post season.

"Winning the (state) team title was our immediate goal after not coming home with the Dual meet championship," said Raider Head Coach Brian Hills. "Anything less than first place would have been a disappointment. It was a total team effort as each of our nine qualifiers won a match at states."

Junior Matt Dunn (130) and sophomore Aaron Nestor (140), both earned silver medals at Hershey. Sophomore Steve Nestor, who won only 13 matches as a freshman, was fourth at 125 pounds, junior Mason Stewart (135) and sophomore Lawrence Beckman (152) were fifth and record-setting senior Jason Brown (145) ended seventh.

So dominating were the Raiders in Hershey, they virtually had the points title wrapped up by Friday evening. Reynolds tallied 83 points to win the team trophy. Curwensville (56), Schuylkill Valley (53), Wyalusing (47) and Tyrone (41) rounded out the top five.

For Dunn (124-9), it was his third career state medal, having finished first, third and now second. Beckman's medal was his second, after finishing sixth a year ago.

Senior Ryan Foust (215) and juniors Paul Kulka (119) and Mike Edwards (275) were also state qualifiers.

"We were extremely pleased to qualify nine wrestlers for the state tournament," said Hills. "We thought realistically we could get six to eight (to Hershey) this year, eight if everything went right. But as the regional tournament progressed all our kids wrestled with great passion and we exceeded our expectations."

Ten Raiders wrestled at the Northwest Regional with only freshman Brandon Maun (103) failing to survive the event. Hills' team won the tournament for the fourth straight year with 137.5 points. It was such a powerful performance by the squad that second place finisher Mercer (55) was nearly 90 points back.

S. Nestor, Dunn, Stewart and Beckman were all Regional champs – a new school record - while Kulka and A. Nestor were second with Brown, Foust and Edwards finishing third.

At Districts, Reynolds was equally impressive with 12 entrants and 11 place-winners. Freshmen Curtis Reynolds (112, 6th) and Mike Miller (171) were the only Raiders to survive Sections but fail to make it to Regionals.

Reynolds (213 points) nearly doubled up the score on second-place finisher Fort LeBoeuf (122.5), winning the team points race for the fifth straight year.

Individual D-10 champs were Dunn, A. Nestor and Beckman, while Kulka, S. Nestor, Stewart and Brown all finished second. Dunn's third D-10 title ties a school record, while Beckman's crown was his second.

Despite a new Section format which reduced the number of tournaments within D-10 from three to two, the Raiders had little trouble dominating the event and winning their eighth straight points title.

Six Raiders - S. Nestor, Dunn, Stewart, A. Nestor, Beckman and Edwards - were champs. For Dunn and Edwards it was their third straight individual championships while Stewart, A. Nestor and Beckman both won their second.

As a team, the Raiders won their fourth District 10 Dual Match Championship, besting Saegertown (48-21) in the semifinals and Fort LeBoeuf (34-27) in the championship bout.

At the state duals in Hershey, Reynolds defeated Northwestern Lehigh (42-12) and eventual third-place finisher Mount Pleasant (32-24) to advance to the final where they locked horns with Northern Lehigh. The Raiders lost that match,

35-22, to finish second, even though they had defeated NL earlier in the season. The team finished with 18 dual match victories, breaking a school record that had stood for more than 20 years.

The Raiders quickly regrouped from their only loss to roar through the post season. Hills credited a good portion of his team's success to some outstanding senior leadership.

"This year's seniors - although lacking in quantity - made up for it in quality," Hills said. "Both Ryan Foust and Jason Brown qualified for states and "JB" brought home a seventh place medal. JB was a four-year starter for us winning over 100 matches. I believe he now has the Raider record (177) for competing in the most matches."

"Ryan Foust went from being the guy in the upper weights trying not to get pinned in his earlier years to a state ranked wrestler as he matured. Ryan also provided great leadership this season in his role as team captain. We also had Cory Sternthal as a late season addition who added a hard work ethic to our practice room. We are very proud of our seniors."

Three wrestlers reached the 100-win plateau during the season. Brown closes with 121 wins while juniors Dunn (124) and Stewart (104) reached the mark as juniors.

Other wrestlers that contributed much to the success of this year's team were juniors Sam Kulka and Josh Tofani and freshmen Ryan Dawes and Corey Brown.

Hills previewed next season by hinting at some very exciting news.

"Next year proves to be very exciting and the bar will be set very high as we return seven state qualifiers, including five medalists," said Hills. "A total of 15 letterman will return including rising juniors Travis Sommerfeld and Jon Uhrin, who were injured and out for all of this season. Add to that some talented eighth graders who will be moving up makes for a very competitive squad."

"We are looking at the possibility of adding the Beast of the East tournament to our schedule which will make our schedule the strongest it's ever been," Hills said, reasoning, "We feel with this group of kids we should get them the greatest exposure possible as major colleges are well represented at both the Beast and the Ironman."

NOTES – Stewart's 44 wins this season also broke the former school record for most wins in a season. ... Some updated career records, Dunn (124-9), Brown (121-56), Stewart (104-33), Edwards (89-36), Beckman (84-12), A. Nestor (67-16), Foust (59-42), Kulka (57-19) and S. Nestor (51-18). All will be back next year except Brown and Foust. ... Coach Hills' career coaching record now stands at 254-32-1, while the school's all-time mark climbs to 566-70-2. ... This was the 15th Reynolds team to finish the regular season undefeated. ... Counting the six this season, Reynolds now has 72 all-time state place-winners.

**School Records Set or Tied
During 2004-05 Include:**

- Most Dual Match Points, Single Season: 918.
- Most Dual Match Victories, Single Season: 18.
- Most Points in a Single Dual Match: 80-0, vs. Hickory
- Most Wins by an Individual, Season: Lawrence Beckman, 45.
- Most Career Matches Wrestled: Jason Brown, 177.
- Most Regional Champions, One Season: 4.
- Most Regional Championships, Individual: Matt Dunn, 3 (tie).
- Most District Championships, Individual: Matt Dunn, 3 (tie).