

Linn-Mar wrestlers primed for success

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Linn-Mar High School wrestling team ended the 2010-11 season with controversy, setbacks and disappointment.

It began when Joel Northrup got caught in a national whirlwind when he declined to wrestle a girl in the state tournament and it ended with the Lions fading to 15th place in the team standings when a strong top-10 showing appeared likely.

The Lions were worn out and wounded when the season ended, but Coach Doug Streicher saw enough last year to think the 2011-12 campaign could be much better. The time is drawing near.

Linn-Mar returns six wrestlers who qualified for the 2011 state tournament, giving Streicher a strong nucleus to begin the new season. And that doesn't count Mark Atwater, who landed in a tough bracket at the district meet last year and failed to advance to Des Moines. He's back, too.

Linn-Mar also has some promising freshmen on the team, including Toby Northrup, Joel's younger brother.

Streicher is looking for a quiet, healthy and successful season this year. "I'd put this team up against any team in the state," he said. "I think we can challenge anybody."

High school wrestling has new weight classes this year, but Streicher does not think it will have a significant impact on his team. "We could have a strong team at any weight," he said.

Alijah Jeffery finished third at the 2011 state tournament and compiled a 37-4 record at 103 pounds last year. He's ticketed for the new 113-pound class this season.

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Northrup went 35-4 at 112 pounds and is headed for 132 pounds, where presumably he won't have to face Cassy Herkelman of Cedar Falls in the first round of the state tournament. That's the girl he didn't want to wrestle in Des Moines last season.

Ross Lembeck placed seventh at the state tournament and finished 27-4 at 135 pounds. He's headed for the 145- or 152-pound bracket this season. Josh Pedersen, who finished 34-15 at 140 pounds last season, joins Lembeck in the 145 or 152 debate.

Mitch Wantock placed sixth and finished 13-2 at 171 pounds, and he'll wrestle at 170 pounds or 182 once he recovers from a broken ankle suffered during the football season.

Atwater is aiming for 195 or 182 pounds, looking to add wrestling laurels to his long list of accomplishments on the football field this past season.

A.J. Garcia, who went 43-4 at 215 pounds, apparently is headed for the 285-pound heavyweight bracket this season. Garcia lost his first two matches at the state tournament last year and failed to place, something he hopes to rectify.

"We're pretty excited about the year," Streicher said. "We've got a pretty good team that could come together if things go right for us.

"Time will tell if we'll perform and get the job done and keep improving, or whether they plateau out and rest on what they've already done as wrestlers and athletes. They've got to put in the work and put in the time to get better, so we'll see if that happens."

The Lions open the season on Thursday, Dec. 1 by hosting Iowa City West and Xavier.