

Kennedy matmen honor Clark's memory

Written by Jim Ecker

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Brent Paulson lost an assistant coach and good friend. Luke Kremer and Ryan Rodriguez lost a coach they respected and could joke around with in practice. Kyle Clark lost his brother.

Everybody on the Cedar Rapids Kennedy wrestling team has been saddened by the sudden loss of Jeff Clark, the Kennedy assistant coach who died unexpectedly Nov. 27 from a pulmonary embolism in his lungs. He was 34 years old.

They honored Jeff Clark's memory at Kennedy High School Thursday when the Cougars hosted Cedar Washington and Dubuque Senior in a Mississippi Valley Conference meet. The Cougars gave Jeff's parents, John and Karen Clark, a framed photo and plaque during a brief but touching ceremony.

The Cougars also honored Clark's memory by fighting hard and winning both meets, topping Dubuque Senior 45-31 and defeating Washington 41-23. Washington trimmed Dubuque Senior, 37-36.

The Cougars lost a friend, brother, assistant coach and all-around good guy.

"It's not something you can really get over," said Rodriguez, a senior and one of Kennedy's top wrestlers. "I think it's something we just have to learn to live with. He was a great man and he influenced a lot of people."

"He was a big part of our lives and our team, and we're going to miss him. We're going to keep winning for him."

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Rodriguez and Kremer were close to Clark, probably the closest of any of the wrestlers. They'd joke around and have fun, trying to lighten the mood in a tough sport.

"A lot of jokes," said Kremer, a senior and another of Kennedy's top wrestlers. "He'd kind of give us crap and we'd give him crap back."

"He was one of those guys that had a hard shell on the outside," said Rodriguez, "and inside he was all gooey."

Kyle Clark was best friends with his older brother. They helped Paulson with the Kennedy wrestling program and worked out together. Kyle misses his brother dearly.

"Our day always started with a workout," Kyle said. "The first time I came back to work out, it was weird not having him there."

"Every day something new comes up and it's like, 'I want to talk to my brother about this.' Two or three times a day something comes up. I'll want to talk to him and he's not there."

The Kennedy coaches had to make personnel decisions during Thursday's meet, but their conversations were not the same. "Brent and I were sitting there talking about what we need to do. It used to be a three-way conversation," Kyle said.

Paulson had the same empty feeling at times Thursday. He's trying to fight through the painful loss as well.

"When things get tough, I always think about what Jeff would do," said Paulson. "He was one guy I bounced a lot of things off of."

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Kennedy postponed a meet last Thursday following Jeff Clark's death. The Cougars struggled at the Keith Young Invitational in Cedar Falls this past Saturday, still trying to regain their equilibrium, but Paulson thinks the team bounced back this week.

Jeff Clark's death was the second tragedy that's affected the Kennedy wrestling program this year. Drake Brown, a Kennedy sophomore and member of the squad, died earlier in the school year.

"It's been tough on our team," said Paulson. "I'm extremely proud of the kids, how they came back fighting. It's brought us closer in a lot of ways."

Paulson had a team meeting after Jeff Clark died, trying to help his athletes - and himself - move forward.

"I tried to set the tone as best I could," he said. "I told them that we're not going to dedicate the season to anybody, because Jeff wouldn't want that. If you want to honor him, when you take the mat, wrestle like he would want you to wrestle."

"This will go on forever," said Paulson. "It's not like it's going to pass today because we won, or a year from now. It's going to be there. He made a big impression on a lot of these kids. And me."

Kremer said that last week seemed like one of the longest weeks of school he's ever had, with visitation and services.

"It's definitely hard. It's something that's been on our minds," Kremer said. "We need to take care of Kyle and make sure he's all right."

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Kyle Clark took some time off after his brother died, then returned to Kennedy wrestling. "I wanted to get back right away because I had to do something," he said. "I couldn't just sit around the house.

"It's been tough," he said, "but there are the right people around here to get through it."

Jeff Clark graduated from Kennedy High School in 1996 and had served as an assistant coach since 2001.

"Nothing is going to bring him back," said Rodriguez. "We'll make sure we do everything we can to honor his name and honor ourselves. Just keep winning for him, I guess."

KENNEDY 45, DUBUQUE SENIOR 31

- 138 - Ryan Rodriguez (CRK) tech fall Zack Donovan, 16-1 (4:55).
- 145 - Ben Feuerhelm (CRK) won by forfeit.
- 152 - Jack Freese (DS) dec. Keenen Nosek, 8-2.
- 160 - Shawn Knox (CRK) pinned Mitch McElmeel, 5:40.
- 170 - Shane Williams (CRK) pinned Alex Gudenkauf, 2:17.
- 182 - Rob Blake (DS) pinned Curtis Stacey, 3:49.
- 195 - Dakota Aldrich (CRK) pinned Mitch Powers, 1:21.
- 220 - Jesse Blus (DS) major dec. Zack Goodall, 16-3.
- 285 - Zach Meyer (DS) won by forfeit.
- 106 - Chase Lynn (DS) pinned Grant Helle, :46.
- 113 - Kobi Cowen (CRK) won by forfeit.
- 120 - Kemmy Betwell (DS) pinned Nick Waterhouse, 3:51.
- 126 - J.D. Ruzicka (CRK) dec. Jordan Peterson, 12-6.
- 132 - Luke Kremer (CRK) pinned Enoc Alverenga, 3:17.

WASHINGTON 37, DUBUQUE SENIOR 36

- 145 - Kaisar Herz (CRW) won by forfeit.
- 152 - Jack Freese (DS) major dec. Tyler Burkle, 14-4.
- 160 - Mitch McElmeel (DS) pinned Evan Lehrman, 2:43.
- 170 - Meshak Niyongere (CRW) pinned Alex Gudenkauf, 1:46.
- 182 - Drake Hickok (CRW) pinned Rob Blake, 5:33.
- 195 - Mitch Powers (DS) dec. Noah Fox, 6-1.
- 220 - Jesse Blus (DS) won by forfeit.

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- 285 - Tyler Burrell (CRW) pinned Zach Meyer, :57.
- 106 - Chase Lynn (DS) tech fall Dax Dills, 15-0 (3:27).
- 113 - Troy Neagle (CRW) won by forfeit.
- 120 - Kemmy Betwell (DS) pinned Trey Schuler, 4:51.
- 126 - Jordan Peterson (DS) pinned Keenan Newbold, 3:09.
- 132 - Jordin Eicher (CRW) dec. Enoc Alverenga, 8-2.
- 138 - Trevor Luebe (CRW) major dec. Zack Donovan, 12-4.

KENNEDY 41, WASHINGTON 23

- 152 - Keenen Nosek (CRK) dec. Tyler Burkle, 4-1.
- 160 - Shawn Knox (CRK) dec. Evan Lehrman, 8-3.
- 170 - Curtis Stacey (CRK) pinned Meshak Niyongere, 4:18.
- 182 - Shane Williams (CRK) dec. Drake Hickok, 5-4.
- 195 - Dakota Aldrich (CRK) pinned Noah Williams, 2:41.
- 220 - Zach Goodall (CRK) pinned Noah Fox, 1:23.
- 285 - Tyler Burrell (CRW) won by forfeit.
- 106 - Dax Dills (CRW) major dec. Kobi Cowen, 11-0.
- 113 - Troy Neagle (CRW) won by forfeit.
- 120 - Trey Schuler (CRW) major dec. Nick Waterhouse, 13-2.
- 126 - J.D. Ruzicka (CRK) major dec. Keenen Newbold, 15-1.
- 132 - Luke Kremer (CRK) major dec. Jordin Eicher, 14-6.
- 138 - Ryan Rodriguez (CRK) pinned Trevor Luebe, 3:33.
- 145 - Kaisar Herz (CRW) dec. Ben Feuerhelm, 6-0.