

Drake Allen hopes to make his father proud

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 12 January 2012 07:05 - Last Updated Thursday, 12 January 2012 07:13



Drake Allen missed wrestling. That part of the story is fairly simple, but the rest is not.

After deciding not to wrestle at Jefferson High School this season, he changed his mind and rejoined the team in mid-December and made a big splash last week when he began competing in meets again.

He collected two pins in a double-dual against Iowa City West and Dubuque Wahlert last Thursday, then won the 220-pound title at the Ottumwa tournament on Saturday.

"That's a nice way to start, huh?" Jefferson Coach Dick Briggs said Tuesday with a smile.

The wrestling part has been fairly easy so far, although Allen needs to work on his conditioning to catch up with everyone else. The emotional part has been much harder, although he said family and friends have helped him through a difficult time.

Lincoln Allen, his father, died Dec. 3 at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids. He was 41 years old.

Mr. Allen had encouraged his son to wrestle this season when workouts began in November, but Drake decided to concentrate on his school work and did not go out for the team. Then his father died, and about two weeks later Drake was wrestling again.

"He wanted me to wrestle really bad," Allen said. "I'm not saying that was the deciding factor (in joining the team). It was just something I wanted to do and something I thought I needed to do."

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"I feel like I'll do my best and hope that he'll be proud of me."

Allen said his main reason for deciding not to wrestle this season was to get better grades in school.

"I wasn't having problems with grades," said Allen, a junior. "In my eyes, they weren't as good as they should be or could have been. I wanted to get them up before college.

"Part of me still wanted to wrestle, but I was thinking about what I'd be doing after high school and I didn't really see wrestling in my future. So I wanted to focus on school and get my GPA up and get into a good college. That was my main reason for not going out."

Drake said he did well in school this fall and began thinking about wrestling again. "I missed it a lot. I started feeling like I had my grades under control," he said.

In the midst of all that, he had to deal with the grief of losing his father.

"I have a lot of family and friends that are around to support me," he said. "All of the emotional support that I need, I have. It sucks, but it's something I have to deal with."

Drake is dedicating the season to his father.

"In a way, yes," he said. "I'm dedicating it to myself, but after practices and after meets there's a part of me that's wondering - I wonder if he'd be proud of me?"

Allen wrestled for the J-Hawks last season and Briggs was disappointed when Allen said he was not going to join the team this year. Briggs tried to talk him out of it.

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"A little bit," he said. "Wrestling is too hard of a sport for it to be the coach's decision."

Then in December, soon after his father died, Allen asked to meet with Briggs but did not give a reason.

"He came into my room and I had no idea what he wanted," Briggs said. "I hadn't really talked to him much since his father's passing.

"I talked to him about that. My concern for him was as a person. We discussed the situation a little bit."

Allen asked to rejoin the team, roughly a month after practice had started and several weeks after the season had begun. Briggs sought input from the team. The answer was yes.

"My concern as a coach and as a human being and as an educator is to try and help a young person," Briggs said. "If we can lend him a hand by being a part of the team, we're happy to try and help, that's for sure.

"I think he's been missing it a little bit. That's the right reason to come back. He was missing it and wanted to be part of the team."

Allen competed at 220 pounds last week, but he doesn't look the part and has been wrestling against guys who are considerably bigger. "I'm around 190-ish," he said.

Brandon Leary is entrenched at the 195-pound weight class, so 195 is not an option, but Allen could dip to 182 pounds and challenge for a spot there at some point.

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"Right now I really don't care what weight I'm wrestling at," he said. "I'm just glad to be wrestling again. It's mostly where the team needs me."

Briggs said Allen has found a way to be successful at 220, despite giving away so much weight.

"His speed and his explosiveness are what's carried him through so far, I think," Briggs said. "He's really fast, especially at 220, and he's explosive. And he's pretty strong, too."

Allen likes to think his way through a match, matching wits with an opponent.

"I use whatever works," he said. "It's hard to go into a wrestling match with a specific plan. You try something and if he stops it, you have to move on to something else. I try to play my own game, and not their game, and whatever happens, happens."

Allen is happy with his 6-0 start, but he's not fooled. It was one good week, but there's a long way to go.

"I learned a lot," he said. "I learned I was really out of shape. I was pretty proud to be 6-and-0, but I also realize there's a lot better competition to be ready for. I mostly learned I need to step it up in practice."

"I'm still a little rusty here and there, but I'm starting to get a feel for it again and getting back in the groove."

Allen was named the Defensive MVP for the Jefferson football team this fall, so he's a talented athlete. He said his father supported all of his activities, whether it was sports or something else.

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Allen also said his father supported his decision not to wrestle this season.

"He was mostly supporting whatever I choose to do," Allen said. "He was happy I was focusing on grades. There were a few times where he said, 'Are you sure you don't want to go out for wrestling?' For the most part, he just knew whatever decision I made, that's what I wanted to do and that it would be right."

Allen said his father attended as many events as he could, but was busy and sometimes couldn't make it.

"He probably wished he could have been to more," Allen said. "But at the same time, he always texted me. I'd have a text (message) before I got back to the locker room, telling me he heard how good I did or how bad I did, but he was always supportive."

Allen said he had a good relationship with his father. "Oh yeah," he said. "I could talk to him about whatever I needed to."

Jefferson is scheduled to host Kennedy in a dual meet Thursday night. Allen will try to make his father proud, as always.