

NJCAA Preview 2014:

Déjà vu~Cougars go “Back-to-the-Future”

Renfro seeks Three-Peat, Whitcomb wants repeat!

By Johnnie Johnson: AWN Small College editor and eWrestlingMedia

Spokane, Washington- The setting is Spokane, Washington, the place is the Spokane Convention Center, and the cast includes Coach Josh Rhoden and the CCC Cougars seeking to regain the NJCAA national title, the year, 2011!!! Now, jump into your vintage 1983, stainless steel *DeLorean*, and set the date to *February 28th, 2014*, and head “*Back-to-the future! To the NJCAA National Wrestling Championships*” As you land in you discover that Coach Rhoden has positioned his Clackamas team to regain the title the Cougars last held when the JUCO nationals were held in Spokane, with his team again ranked as the top team in the nation with 10-of-10 national qualifiers and the favorite to win the NJCAA title.

Coming off a 3rd place finish at nationals last season, and an NWCA National Dual title in January, Coach Rhoden and the Cougar Wrestlers have not finished lower than 8th place at the NJCAA National Championships including the 2011 NJCAA National Championship! Under the guidance of 7th-year head coach Josh Rhoden, the program has produced 4 national champions, 35 All-Americans and 50 Academic All-Americans.

Chasing the Cougars are two coaches who have made a lot of NJCAA history and who both can claim to be defending the 2013 title. At last years NJCAA championship, One Cardinal team of Labette, directed by Coach Joe Renfro, had a goal to repeat as JUCO Champions, while the Cardinals of North Idaho, under the tutelage of Coach Pat Whitcomb looked to regain the title that had eluded them for the past ten years. As a result of a 120-120 tie, both coaches and teams walked away with their goal of a NJCAA Championship.

In NJCAA Wrestling Championship history, only four times, dating back to 1960, has the tournament crowned- co-Champions. Northeastern J.C. of Sterling, Co., and Joliet J.C., of Illinois were the first teams to end in a tie back in 1964. In 1995, the second tie happened thirty-one years later when Garden City (KS) and Lassen College (CA) shared the title. Prior to the 2013 championships, the third and most recent tie happened in 1998, between Lassen College (CA) and North Idaho College. It is interesting to note that that Pat Whitcomb was also part of the team tie in 1998. Whitcomb joins coach Rex Branum (Lassen) as the only two coaches in NJCAA history to have tied twice for the NJCAA title.

The history that Whitcomb would like is to up NIC’s record to 15 national titles with a repeat, while Renfro would like to have a title that would set several records and history. If the NEO Golden Norse are able to win the title, this would give the reinstated program a national title, Renfro would have three-peated as a coach with two different teams, Labette and NEO, which has not been done in the history of NJCAA wrestling.

The Golden Norsemen are ranked second, wrestling the first year as a reinstated program, had nine first-place finishers and one runner-up at the West Central Regional. As a result, NEO rolled up 160.0 team points and finished 35.5 points ahead of second place Colby (Kan.) Community College ranked 11th. 9th ranked Neosho County (Kan.) Community College was third with 103.0 points, and the Golden Norsemen send all ten wrestlers to nationals. Earning a second straight trip to the national tournament are [Josh Walker](#), [Payne Hatter](#) and [Shelby Krout](#). All three qualified for Golden Norse coach [Joe Renfro](#) while at Labette. Walker finished third at 125, Hatter was fourth at 174, and Krout was a qualifier at the 2013 meet.

With the #1, #3, and #4 nationally ranked teams, the Western Region was billed as the toughest regional in the NJCAA. Top rated Clackamas had 6 tournament finalists and all 10 Cougars finishing in the top 3 at their respective weight classes to qualify for nationals. The team was led by 133 lb Cary J Palmer and 157 lb Eleazar DeLuca each of whom won their respective weight classes. #3 North Idaho and #4 Northwest College would each qualify all ten wrestlers to Spakane.

Five Trappers emerged as champions and all 10 qualified for nationals for coach Jim Zeigler and Northwest (Wy). “This is one of the most intense tournaments and events I’ve had in 20 years,” the coach said. Northwest finished second in team scores with 134 points, just behind No. 1 Clackamas’s 137.5, despite placing the most champions of any team, beating Clackamas 4-0 in final bouts and finishing ahead of the Cougars in seven of 10 weight classes.

Jeff McCormick highlighted the action-packed day by taking down the No. 1 and No. 2-ranked wrestlers in the nation to win the 149-pound title. A wrestler at 157 pounds all season, McCormick dropped to 149 after losing weight during his recovery from an appendectomy. McCormick was seeded fourth in the bracket and faced top-ranked Jeremy Golding of North Idaho in the semifinals after receiving a bye in the first round. McCormick, a redshirt freshman, controlled the pace of the match on his way to a 3-2 decision victory. Sophomore Cody Vichi, who was out three weeks with an injured hand, also made his return for the Trappers. The third-ranked Vichi pinned Southwest Oregon’s Mathew Nguyen at 5:39 of the finals to claim the 125-pound title. “I thought Cody looked like a world champion,” Zeigler said. Sophomore Zac Loveless took the 141-pound title, but only after battling No. 8 Robbie Rizzolino of Clackamas in an epic seven period final bout. Loveless, ranked third at 141, was down 4-1 after the first period but fought back to close the gap 4-3 after two. Another takedown gave Loveless a brief 5-4 lead but Rizzolino scored an escape in time to send the match into overtime. After three scoreless overtime periods Loveless finally tripped up Rizzolino by the ankle and scored the match winning takedown.

Cole McArthur went 3-0 on his way to the 174-pound title. The ninth-ranked McArthur shut out his opponents in the first two rounds (5-0 then 3-0) before downing Clackamas’ Tyler White 8-6 in the finals. Miles Nixon topped the 184-pound bracket with a 3-0 record. His final bout versus No. 1 Adrian Salas of Clackamas was stopped due to a Salas injury at 2:28. Sophomore Diorian Coleman (ranked fifth) narrowly lost the 165-

pound title when he dropped the final bout 3-2 to No. 11 Tyler McLean of North Idaho. Jon Wixom took down the No. 2-ranked Ithoughama Odighizuwa of Clackamas in the 197-pound semifinals but lost a 16-4 major decision to No. 3 V.J. Giulio of North Idaho in the finals. McCormick received the Outstanding Wrestler award and Zeigler was named the West District Coach of the Year.

Standing in the path of NIC, NEO, CCC and Northwest are legitimate title contenders Muskegon (MI) and Lincoln (Ill.) colleges. Another team with ten qualifiers and a team who have won seven national title, including five straight, and is also a title threat, is Iowa Central of Ft. Dodge, Iowa. The fifth ranked Muskegon wrestling team finished second in the Central District/National Qualifier tournament at Triton College in River Grove, IL. The Jayhawks qualified nine of the 10 weight classes for the national tournament. Lincoln College edged MCC by four points for the title, with six champions and ten qualifiers. "While we fell short of our goal to come in here and win the district, we are still in a good position to perform well at the national tournament," said Coach Brunger. "We have qualified nine wrestlers and all of them will be major point scorers for us at nationals." The team had an outstanding semifinal round sending nine wrestlers into the championship match and one into the consolation round, building a 22-point team lead. Unfortunately, only freshman Zack Cooper (Whitehall, MI/Whitehall) at 133 won a match in the last round, and the lead evaporated. Central Region The final team scores were: Lincoln, 99.5, MCC 95.5, Harper College 83.5, Triton College 29.5, and Waubonsee College 14.0.

Ellsworth C.C. was the higher ranked team and favored to win the North Central District, but the Tritons captured the regional championship and advanced nine of 10 wrestlers to the national tournament. The Panthers would have to settle for second place and nine national qualifiers. On winning the title, Iowa Central head coach Luke Moffitt stated, "We always seem to peak at the right time. They didn't announce the team scores for awhile, and we knew we would be in the running. When they did announce it we were four points ahead and our guys feed off of that. "This is just the icing on the cake. Iowa Central (150) out distanced themselves from runner-up Ellsworth (138) and third place finisher Rochester (133), grabbing three individual regional championships. Moffitt was also named regional coach of the year. Darrell Pampkin (133), Bryce Fisher (197) and Malcolm Allen (285) were all regional champions. "Our champions wrestled really well," Moffitt said. "Bryce had a tough weight with a returning All-American in the finals. Pampkin was wrestling a kid that they split matches on the season and he pulled it out in crunch time. "Malcolm continued his dominance. He hasn't lost to a junior college kid all year."

Ellsworth, Neosho, Rochester, and Colby will also battle for team hardware in Spokane.

In one of the most suprising regionals, Darton State College shocked NJCAA wrestling as the Cavaliers took their first-ever Eastern District II Championship title, today at Darton, and head wrestling coach James Hicks became Darton's first to win Eastern District II Coach of Year. The Cavaliers went into the tournament ranked No. 30 in the nation, and hit the mats against higher ranked schools from the Northeast Coast, where

wrestling has historically been stronger than the programs south of the Mason-Dixon line. Apparently, no one told that to the Cavaliers. "I knew that if we wrestled well, we could win it," Hicks said.

His team performed exceptionally well. The Cavaliers' 197-pounder was injured prior to the tournament, so Darton was unable to compete in that weight class. The Cavaliers had to get the win by scoring extra points in the nine other weight divisions by way of pins, tech falls and major decisions. "When you're dominating matches, you get bonus points," Hicks said. "That was the key to us winning with nine guys." Darton scored 94.5 team points. Nassau scored 87 to finish second, and Gloucester CC scored 78.5 to finish third. Darton's Davion Caston (125), Quitni Noel (133), and 141-pounder Zach Wright all finished as region champs winning the first three individual title on the day. Their performances paved the way for the middle and upper weights. 133-pounder Quitni Noel stated, "A lot of the schools underestimate us (Darton). I went into this with the mindset of this is my last year, you know, I got to win." Noel and teammates Caston, Wright, Orlando Nwade, Anthony Smith, Matt Carroll, Anthony Saulle and Jesse Rowland all qualified for the National Championship tournament.

In the East Region II- Niagara C.C.C. wrestling receives their 19th Regional title! 149 pound Kevin Strong received Region Most Outstanding Wrestler and head coach Keith Maute received Region Coach of the Year. Niagara had 6 Regional Champions and 10 total qualifiers for the National tournament. The Thunderwolves qualifiers were regional champions 125 Eric Velez, 141 Marcus Popp, 149 Kevin Strong, 157 Tyler Bruce, 197 Max Antone, and 285 El-Shaddal Gilmore-VanHosen. Their national qualifiers included; 133 Cody Carbery, 165 Chris Nevinger, 174 Shane Currey, and 164 Cedrick Stephens. With ten qualifiers, Niagara could also challenge for one of the top four team trophies.

The Mercyhurst North East Wrestling team crowned three champions and had four runner-up finishes in the Easter District II Championships hosted by Niagara County CC. The Saints finished second overall in the team race to a tough NCCC team. John Dillon (Boardman, OH), Tim Vargo (Union City, PA) and Alexander Svetz (North East, PA) each calimed individual championships. Dillon brought home the Saints first title of the night in the 133lb weight class with a 7-5 decision over Jake Nicholson of Jamestown CC. At 165lbs, Vargo had a dominate 11-4 win over top seeded and former three time New York State champ Chris Nevinger of NCCC. Svetz followed up in the same fashion at the 174lb weight class with a 10-0 major decision of Niagara's Shane Curry. Finishing Second for the Saints were 149lber Jordan Palanca (Blairstown, NJ), 157lber Cole Shirey (Mayport, PA), 184lber Jamar Henry (Greenville, PA) and 197lber Kojo Boadu (Meade, PA). Lorenzo Maddox (Baltimore, MD) received a wild card bid for his third place finish at 285.

"It's great having it in the Spokane area because the Greater Spokane League is such a hotbed of talent," Whitcomb said. "It brings that national attention back to the Northwest and get those little kids in the stands, hopefully not just to wrestle but to go to college." That's the long-term goal. The action begins at 9:15 a.m. Friday with the Parade of All Teams; the first matches will begin at 9:30. Saturday's matches will begin at 10:30 a.m.

with the championship finals beginning at 6:45 p.m. The tournament includes 257 wrestlers from 39 teams.

NJCAA 2014 National Tournament Qualifiers

- [Eastern I District \(Regions 3, 21\)](#)
- [Eastern II District \(Regions 10, 15, 17, 19\)](#)
- [Central District \(Regions 4, 12, 24\)](#)
- [North Central District \(Regions 11, 13\)](#)
- [Western District \(Regions 1, 9, 18\)](#)
- [West Central District \(Regions 2, 6, 16, 22\)](#)

NJCAA Top 20 Teams

- 1 [Clackamas Community College](#)
- 2 [Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College](#)
- 3 [North Idaho College](#)
- 4 [Northwest College](#)
- 5 [Muskegon Community College](#)
- 6 [Ellsworth Community College](#)
- 7 [North Iowa Area Community College](#)
- 8 [Lincoln College](#)
- 9 [Neosho County Community College](#)
- 10 [Rochester Community and Technical College](#)
- 11 [Colby Community College](#)
- 12 [Iowa Central Community College](#)
- 13 [Niagara County Community College](#)
- 14 [Iowa Lakes Community College](#)
- 15 [Iowa Western Community College](#)
- 16 [Spartanburg Methodist College](#)
- 17 [Nassau Community College](#)
- 18 [Southwestern Oregon Community College](#)
- 19 [Minnesota West Community & Technical College](#)
- 20 [Highline Community College](#)