

Bulldogs are Back

... And so are California native sons for rebuilt Fresno State

After shutting out the lights on its storied Division I wrestling program in 2006, Fresno State University will make its long awaited return to the mats this season as members of the Big 12 conference for the 2017-18 competition season.

It has been a long time coming for college wrestling fans across the country but especially to those in California's Central Valley, a premier wrestling hotbed within the Golden State that has produced Division I champions like Mike Gallego (1968) and Stephen Abas (1999-2002).

Hired in 2013 as the university's eighth President, Joseph I. Castro immediately laid out his vision for the program's reinstatement, one that had accumulated 33 All-Americans from 1981 to 2005, asking the athletic department to consider it as an option.

Just four years later, first-time head coach Troy Steiner, a 1992 NCAA champion at Iowa who spent the last 10 seasons assisting at Oregon State, including a four-year stint as associate head coach, will lead the Bulldogs this season.

Hired in May of 2016, Steiner worked quickly and efficiently to concoct a diversified and accomplished coaching staff that includes Israel Silva, Jason Chamberlain and Joe Colon.

"The last year went by pretty quickly," he said. "We are fortunate to have a lot of people that wanted to help. You have to reach out and get to know some of these resources that our available to you outside of your staff. I know it was important to surround myself with great people. My staff helped with putting together our RTC, facility planning, schedule, conference affiliation and then of course recruiting. We are ready to get back in the game."

The Valley Regional Training Center also boasts former Bulldog phenom and three-time NCAA champion Stephen Abas, one of the all-time California greats.

Recruiting was one of the most important aspects of the rebirth of Fresno State wrestling, and Steiner wasted little time on the trail.

Steiner is also excited about the impact Fresno State wrestling's reinstatement will, and already has, had on growing the sport of wrestling in California, especially within the Central Valley. A quick glance at the 2017-18 FSU roster unveils that all 20 Bulldog grap-



Emilio Saavedra (left), a native of Modesto, Calif., spent the past two years at Old Dominion, where he won a 2015 Midlands championship.

plers hail from the state of California.

"If we can get this thing up and going in the right direction, I think other institutions will look to do the same and bring back their programs," Steiner said. "I am hoping to get the pendulum swinging in the right direction. We want to build this program from within. I think when you look at most of the top programs, they do the same. Most of the kids are from within the state and then they all go and cherry pick a couple of kids."

In his inaugural season at the helm, Steiner's roster, which includes eight transfers, is already packed with talent; many of whom have returned to California after starting their college careers elsewhere.

Sean Williams, a transplant from Big 12-foe Oklahoma, who rose to prominence in California with a state runner-up finish in 2013 after upsetting nationally No. 1-ranked Zahid Valencia, will likely slot in at 125 for Steiner's Bulldogs this season.

Headlining the middleweights, four-time CIF state place-winner Isaiah Hokit from Clovis also joins the Bulldogs after spending a season redshirting at Drexel.

Venturing back to the West Coast after spending a season sitting out for team national champion Penn State, Seth Nevills, a 2016 CIF state champion, will look to fortify the Bulldogs' upper weights, as he will likely man the 285-pounds slot.

Fresno State also nabbed former Old Dominion standout and 2015 Midlands champion Emilio Saavedra, a Modesto native, who will look to fill out the 133- or 141-pound weight class.

"This is another incentive for wrestlers to stay on the West Coast and keep our culture alive," he noted. "Wrestling in our state is on the decline in terms of numbers.

"Wrestling as a whole isn't as popular as it used to be in terms of high school participation numbers. Bringing back this program in this area, which is a hotbed for wrestling, will no doubt be a positive for our state and provides hope for reviving other programs

across the country."

Saavedra is poised for a big year both individually and as a leader on his new team, and he knows he is right where he belongs.

"When I made the decision to transfer, there was only one place I wanted to end up, and that is in California," he continued. "I spoke with my coaches and school administrators about the future direction of the program, and we are definitely on the attack. I'm confident I'm going to be able to achieve my goals and the team goals this year. Fresno

By Tristan Warner

State also happens to be right in my backyard: the Central Valley. These are my people."

Another task Steiner and his staff were faced with was choosing which conference to join. Void of wrestling in the Mountain West Conference, the home to many of Fresno State's other sports, FSU wrestling formerly competed in the now-defunct Western Wrestling Conference up until the program was discontinued in 2006.

While the Pac-12, which is down to five programs after Boise State dropped wrestling, was an option, Fresno State ultimately opted to compete in the Big 12 as one of eight adjunct institutions in the historic conference. (Northern Iowa, formerly of the WWC and Mid-American Conference, is also joining the Big 12, which also has members in the states of Oklahoma, Utah, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota and West Virginia.)

"Both were attractive options," Steiner acknowledged, "but I felt the Big 12 is better for the West and wrestling. It is like a life-line. If we stayed with the Pac-12, it would have isolated all of us out here again. Now, with being in the Big 12, it forces teams to come out here on a regular basis. When they come out to wrestle Fresno State, they will also wrestle the Pac-12 schools. I feel it is a win-win for everyone." ■

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