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St. John guns for No. 1

West senior wants nation's top spot

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Derek St. John has a few palpable goals for his senior season.

He wants to finish his career with another undefeated season and leave West High as a three-time state champion. He would like to complete the year as the nation's top-ranked 160-pounder and have his picture on the Asics All-America poster that West coach Mark Reiland hangs every fall on a wall inside the Trojans' practice room.

But St. John has a few more objectives that could transcend the dominance of his first two state championship seasons.

"You don't want to give up any points or any takedowns of any sort," he said. "That's kind of a goal, I guess."

If that sounds impractical, consider this: St. John went 50-0 last season, running through the toughest competition Reiland could find for his team within the Iowa High School Athletic Association guidelines. The Iowa recruit got taken down just twice.

"And on one of those he basically just fell down," Reiland said.

Quite the opposite occurred this summer when St. John made a meteoric rise up the national rankings. He was arguably one of the nation's most underrated prospects after missing out on the high school summer showcase in Fargo, N.D., with a rib injury after his sophomore season.

Able to compete in Fargo this summer, St. John reached the finals of the freestyle Junior Nationals at 152 pounds. Although he dropped a two-period decision to current Minnesota freshman Mario Mason, St. John established himself as one of the top recruits in the 2009 class and earned the No. 1 spot at 160 in the Amateur Wrestling News rankings.

"To finish No. 1 in the nation would be the best thing," St. John said.

Opponents could have a difficult time knocking St. John from the top spot -- especially if they can't find a way to break down his defense.

"He's deceptively strong, and he's got really good length, so his line of defense is exceptionally good," City High coach Brad Smith said. "He can block with his head, he can use his hands and guys don't get past his elbows much to get into his legs."

Getting to St. John's legs is just part of the battle. Finishing shots is another challenge in itself.

"There were times (last year) when you couldn't believe he could get out of some of that stuff," Reiland said. "But he's got a long body and a great sense of balance, and he's hard to finish on for a lot of guys."

Make no mistake, though, there's a lot more to St. John's repertoire than just defense.

"The guy just knows how to wrestle. Period," Smith said. "I remember him back before he went to West, in junior high, and he was really tenacious on top. And that might be his best position. If he hits something, he stays with it. He's a kid who really has a sense of the mat and where he's at."

St. John tore through his bracket at the Oklahoma Open on Thanksgiving weekend, winning the tournament with five falls in five matches.

"Kids just rolled over and quit," Reiland said. "In the semis and finals, I've never seen kids just give up like that."

He followed that up with two pins, a technical fall and a forfeit victory Saturday at the Newton Duals. The technical fall came against fifth-ranked Meredith Meader of Indianola, 23-8. All eight of Meader's points came on escapes, continuing St. John's mastery within state borders.

St. John rolled up a 134-8 record during his first three seasons. He hasn't lost to an Iowan since the state semifinals of his freshman season when he dropped a 9-4 decision to current Iowa freshman Montell Marion -- a match that might wind up as the only thing that keeps St. John out of the exclusive four-time state champion club.

"I think about that a lot, actually," he said. "There's still this year and I need to finish up this year. But you can always look back and say what if, what could I have done, but I fell short."

"It's not always on my mind. But when you're talking about people who are great and people who were good, Jay Borschel and Dan LeClere and those guys finished with four titles and they're wrestling at Iowa, and it slips into your mind every once in a while."

Those thoughts perhaps come along more frequently than scoring opportunities against St. John. He said wrestling in a training room with takedown artists like Nate Moore and Grant Gambrall, a pair of top-ranked preps last year who are freshmen with the Hawkeyes, made it "almost more relaxing and easier to walk into matches."

But there's a mentality that comes along with it, too. St. John wears the pokerfaced expression of a stingy wrestler who rarely shows apprehension, even when an opponent begins to get him out of position.

"It's seeing it as more of just going out there and dominating, instead of barely squeaking by and giving them any satisfaction or any thoughts that they had a chance to beat you or they were in the match," St. John said. "When you shut them down, it makes you feel like you're a better wrestler."
