

MSU-Northern 2011-12 Wrestling Preview: Talented Lights poised for mat success

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The Montana State University-Northern wrestling team will begin the regular season as the No. 6 team in the NAIA. But Northern head coach Tyson Thivierge has much higher expectations than that.

The Lights begin a new year on the mat with high hopes, lofty goals and even higher expectations. MSU-N finished in the Top 10 at the NAIA national tournament a year ago, and they return a great group of wrestlers, including an infusion of young talent.

And they also return a defending NAIA national champion in senior Evan Hinebauch. The former Havre Blue Pony and three-time Class A state champion enters his senior year as a three-time NAIA All-American and a returning national champion at 184 pounds, though Hinebauch will look to win a title this season at 197.

"Evan had a great season last year, and for now, he'll be moving up to 197," Thivierge said. "I'm sure he's going to feel some pressure this year based on what he accomplished last season. But one of his best attributes is how well he deals with pressure. He's a hard worker and he's a gamer and he's always focused on wrestling one match at a time. So he's ready to go out there and get another one. I know that's what he's focused on."

"As a whole team this year, we might have some youth, but I think we are much more experienced than we were last season," he added. "We have seven really good wrestlers who redshirted last season and they gained a ton of experience along the way. So I feel like we've got a really good mix and we have more depth than we've had since I've been here. So my expectations for this season, and for this team are very high."

Aside from Hinebauch, the Lights return five grapplers who went to the national tourney a year ago. Included in that mix is returning all-american Cameron Neiss, who finished seventh at 133 pounds as a true freshman. Neiss will start the season ranked fourth at 133. Anthony Weerheim is also back at 149 pounds, and was a match away from placing last spring.

"Cam really learned a lot last season, and I think he's going to have a big year," Thivierge said. "I think the same goes for Anthony. He went into the national tournament ranked No. 1 and it didn't end the way he wanted it to. That was a good learning experience for him and now he's got another chance to take to the next level."

Northern will send out both sophomore in Max Payne and Jared Miller at 174 pounds. Both went to the tourney a year ago and they are both nationally ranked at the start of the season. Payne is No. 4 at 174 and Miller is ranked ninth.

"Those two are ready to go," Thivierge said. "Max, like Anthony, didn't have the end to last season that he wanted, but he's not hanging his head. He's worked really hard, he's healthy and he's strong and he's improved, so I expect him to have a great season. Jared has really worked hard too. He's looking like a beast right now, so it's going to be a lot of fun having those guys out there for us."

Kody Reed is also back for the Lights after going to nationals last season at 197. He'll man the 184-pound class for the Lights this season, while Northern has a tremendous up-and-comer in Toby Cheff, who will



MSU-Northern's Evan Hinebauch (right) battles with UGF's Michael French during an NAIA dual last winter in Havre. Hinebauch and the Lights open a new season Wednesday night in Havre.

likely redshirt. Also back in the mix this year is freshman Ethan Hinebauch, who started strong a year ago, but suffered a season-ending injury before December. Hinebauch is nearing his old form and should be a force for the Lights at 165 pounds.

"I would say health-wise, Ethan is back," Thivierge said. "But missing almost a whole year will create a lot of rust, so he's just getting back into wrestling form. But when Ethan is wrestling a solid match, he's almost untouchable, so it's exciting to have him back this year."

MSU-N also has an influx of talent to the lineup this season, led by redshirt freshman Hunter Azure. The former four-time state champion from Poplar missed last season with a knee injury, but he'll start for the Lights at 141 pounds this season. Garrett Tennant will also get some looks at 141 after red shirting a year ago, while the Lights have a talented redshirt in Trevor Goss.

"Hunter is 100 percent healed from his injury," Thivierge said. "But as far as wrestling goes, I'd say he's 60 percent. You miss a lot when you don't wrestle for an entire year, so right now he's just focused on building all that back up again. And he's made great progress, he's getting there."

At 149 pounds, James Petersen comes off of a redshirt year and will join Weerheim in the lineup. Northern also adds Mickey Cheff to the rotation at 157 pounds, as well as Cole Gorder. Both redshirted a year ago, while transfer Kaine Zetterberg, a former Polson standout will wrestle for the Lights at 133 pounds. Beau LaSalle, another former Havre High state champion is also back for his senior season after redshirting a year ago. LaSalle will give the Lights even more depth at 149. Nick King, who also redshirted last season will start the year at heavyweight, but could move to 197.

"Mickey Cheff is a kid who really benefitted from last season," Thivierge said. "He's come into this season ready to go. He looks really good right now. He's focused and he's hungry. But all seven of those guys that redshirted last season all look good right now. They are all hungry, they are all experienced now and they give us a lot more depth than we've had in the past."

In the preseason, Northern had some good battles between former Havre High star Duell Stadel and another true frosh, Riley Miller at 125 pounds. Stadel will likely redshirt this season, while Miller looks to start, but Thivierge is more excited about the future of that weight.

"Wow, two have two guys like that as freshmen," Thivierge said. "That's pretty exciting. They are both solid and are ready right now, and they are going to give us a great run in the lower weights over the next few years."

Several other Lights' recruits could have bright futures too.

Northern added the likes of two-time state champion Trent Jones from Harlem and a former Chinook state champion in Willy Miller. Both will redshirt this season, and both have bright futures. Johnny Schlosser from Conrad is another young Light who could be heard from in the future.

But for the Lights' varsity roster, the future is now, and Thivierge said his team is primed for big things. Northern's schedule will be a great test, especially with home duals Southern Oregon on Nov. 18 and rival UGF on Feb. 9. SOU starts the year ranked No. 2 and the Argos are ranked fifth. The Lights will also host Embry-Riddle and possibly Oklahoma City on Dec. 2, and trips to tournaments like the Cowboy Open, the Battle of the Rockies, the Reno Tournament of Champions and NWCA National Duals to name a few will certainly get Northern battle tested. The season wraps up with the Western Regional in Ashland, Ore., and the NAIA National Tournament March 1-3 in Des Moines, Iowa.

"This is a solid team, I think we have a lot of potential all-americans on our roster right now," Thivierge said. "I like this group. They work hard, they want to get better and they're hungry."

"So the expectation is to win, there is no other expectation," he added. "Our wrestlers just need to have that mentality all the time. We're not quite there yet, but we're close. We just have to have that belief all the time and have that belief carry us into nationals. But no doubt, the expectation is to win now."

Northern opens its season on Wednesday night with a dual against Western Wyoming at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

A new wrestling season at MSU-N

Lights Quick Facts: Northern finished 10th at the 2011 NAIA National Tournament. Northern returns two NAIA All-Americans as well as a defending national champion. Evan Hinebauch won the 184-pound national championship, while Cameron Neiss finished seventh at 133. Northern returns six wrestlers who competed at the NAIA national tournament a year ago. MSU-N has eight wrestlers who saw varsity mat time a year ago. Head Coach Tyson Thivierge begins his fourth season with the Lights. MSU-N is ranked sixth in the NAIA Preseason Coaches Poll.

Lights Ranked: Cameron Neiss, 4th at 133; Anthony Weerheim, 4th at 149; Max Payne, 4th at 174; Jared Miller, 9th at 174; Kody Reed, 11th at 184; Evan Hinebauch, 1st at 197.

MSU-N Home Matches: Oct. 26 vs Western Wyoming; Nov. 18 vs Southern Oregon; Dec. 2 MSU-N Duals; Jan. 19 vs Northwest College; Feb. 8 vs UGF.