Lights hit the mat with lofty goals
MSU-N wrestling team looks strong for 2014-15 season
By George Ferguson
October 30, 2014

Under head coach Tyson Thivierge, the Montana State University-Northern wrestling team has risen back to the level that the program had grown so accustomed to. Now, the challenge is staying there.

The Lights begin the 2014-15 season this weekend and are fresh off of back-to-back third-place finishes at the NAIA national tournament. In both 2013 and 2014, the Lights brought home trophies from the national tournament, and though this year’s Northern squad will feature a bevy of new faces, Thivierge says the goals remain the same.

“We are going to be a younger team this year,” said Thivierge, who begins his sixth season with the Lights, “and we don’t have the roster numbers that some of the other top programs do, but we’re about quality, not quantity, and I feel like we have a lot of quality guys throughout our roster. So, once again, we expect big things from ourselves this season. Our goal is to win a national championship. That hasn’t changed and it won’t change.

The Lights have been in the hunt for that title the last two years, and with a loaded upper half of the lineup, there’s no reason to think they won’t be in the hunt again.

Northern begins the new season ranked No. 5 in the NAIA, and with seven nationally ranked wrestlers.

All-Americans Cameron Neiss and Mickey Cheff have moved on, as has one of the team’s emotional leaders the last three years, Kody Reed. But the Lights aren’t without firepower, especially in the upper weights.

Leading the way is three-time NAIA All-American Ethan Hinebauch (165). He’s still chasing an elusive NAIA individual national championship, and he finished second at 165 last spring. Now, Hinebauch enters his senior season with one more chance to make history.

“I’m almost out of Hinebauch’s,” Thivierge joked. “It’s sad that it’s Ethan’s last year already. I just can’t say enough good things about him, as a wrestler, or as a person. He’s just an amazing kid and he’s going to do big things again this season.”

Next in the lineup is the return of fellow senior Jared Miller (174), who also reached the national championship match last spring. After red-shirting two years ago, Miller has been one of Northern’s most consistent competitors, and he’ll be a force in the NAIA again this season.

“He’s another one, that I just can’t believe it’s his last year with us,” Thivierge said of Miller. “Jared has had a great run, and he’s got one more season to accomplish big things. And I know he will. He’s going to have a really big year.”

The Lights return two more All-Americans in junior Toby Cheff (HWT) and Garrett DeMers (197). For much of last season, the duo battled it out at 197 pounds, but DeMers will man the spot himself this season after
finishing fifth at the national tournament last spring. Cheff, when he returns from a preseason injury, will move up to heavyweight, and Thivierge said it’s a move that will suit Cheff, as well as the team.

“Toby has always wanted to be a heavyweight,” Thivierge said. “He’s accomplished a lot already, but I think he can be an absolute force at the heavyweight spot. He’s been working hard, getting bigger and stronger, and with his style, he’ll be tough to handle. So when we get him back from injury in December, he’s going to have an immediate impact.

“And I think Garrett is going to be a force to be reckoned with this season,” he continued. “He’s grown up so much, and he has so much confidence right now. He’s going to have a huge year.”

Northern also has three more grapplers that should give the Lights a lethal tournament team in the upper weights. Sophomore Jorrell Jones, a former Chinook state champion, is back for his second varsity season after reaching the national tournament at heavyweight last season. Together, Jones and Cheff will give the Lights more firepower at the heavyweight spot than they’ve had in a long time. At 184 pounds, another former Chinook great, Willie Miller will be the Lights’ sole grappler there. Miller red-shirted for Northern two seasons ago, and spent last year at the Naval Academy. At 174, the Lights will have a big 1-2 punch as Cole McCarthur, a former Ronan great, comes to Northern after two years at Northwest College in Wyoming. McCarthur and Miller have had some great matches against each other in the past, and now they will give the Lights a powerful 1-2 punch.

“Cole is a kid we recruited out of high school, and now we got him here,” Thivierge said, “and we’re really excited about that. He and Jared (Miller) were 1-1 against each other last year, so that will be interesting to see how that goes. But having Cole here makes us really deep at 174 again.”

The Lights don’t have as much experience at the front end of their lineup, but they also aren’t short on talent. Red-shirt sophomore Tommy Cooper will be the man now at 157 pounds, after Mickey Cheff decided to forgo his senior season. Cooper has performed well as a backup at 157 for the Lights, and Thivierge said he expects him to step into the spot and do very well.

“It’s Tommy’s turn now,” he said. “He is very excited, and he looks great right now. He’s wrestled well for us when we’ve put him in the dual lineup, and I think he’s ready for this challenge.”

Junior Riley Miller is back for the Lights at 125 pounds, and he’ll be Northern’s lone competitor this season. Miller has had a strong career for Northern, while sharing time at 125, but now the spot will be all his as talented Andrew Caballa will red-shirt this season.

At 133 pounds, junior Brenton Beard or freshman Justin Rodgers, or both, will hold down the spot this season, while freshmen Rainier Montes and Bradyn Rooks will battle for the 141-pound spot, a spot Neiss controlled the last two seasons.

“Beard was a match away from making it to nationals last year,” Thivierge said. “So he’ll do well for us there. And Montes is a kid, he’s a spitting image of Cam (Neiss). He looks the part in every way. Now, he just needs some experience under his belt.”

At 149 pounds, Drew Randall and Logan Foster could be in the lineup, Terry Mason could see action at 157 pounds, and Chris Newport and Andrew Bartel might see some mat time at 165 pounds.

“We don’t have as much depth or experience at the lower weights,” Thivierge said. “While we’re pretty well-off in the upper weights. So I’m not sure how that will translate as a dual team. We’ll have to see how the team comes together as the season goes on. But I know we have the makings to be a very good tournament team. And I know all of these guys are going to work hard to get better and better, each and every day.”

The Lights’ schedule will also make them better. Northern begins the season with the usual swing through Wyoming, and then things get really interesting Nov. 13-14. On Nov. 13, the Lights host bitter rival UGF for the first of two duals this season. The next night, Northern hosts Northwest College and North Idaho College in back-to-back duals.
As usual, the Lights will also wrestle in tough tournaments like the Battle of the Rockies, the Reno Tournament of Champions, and a new tournament, the Missouri Valley Invite, and road duals against Southern Oregon and Embry-Riddle will be tough, too. MSU-N also faces UGF again Feb. 12 in Great Falls.

But as tough as Northern’s schedule is, Thivierge says it’s all preparation for the postseason, a postseason that includes the West Regional in Havre Feb. 21. The NAIA national tournament is set for March 6-7 in Topeka, Kansas.

And the regional and national tournament is what it’s all about for the Lights.

“Every time we step on the mat, whether it’s duals, or tournaments, it’s another chance to prepare for the postseason,” Thivierge said. “It’s another opportunity to get better. And that’s how we look at every season, we want to get better every day and be ready for February and March.

“On paper, to some, it might look like this might be a down year, or a rebuilding year for us,” he continued. "And nationals will be tough again because Grand View will be very strong again. But I think it will be closer than ever. So our goals haven’t changed. We want to be national champions. Nobody probably thinks we can accomplish that this year, and that’s OK with us. But I know this team knows who they are and what they’re capable of, and they have no doubts. They know they are capable of accomplishing everything they set out to do this season.”

The Lights open their season Nov. 1 at the Trapper Open in Powell, Wyoming. Northern is also in Wyoming this month for duals against Northwest College and Western Wyoming, as well as the Cowboy Open in Laramie.

Havre Daily News website