Lights wrestle for glory in Kansas

With high hopes, Northern sends six grapplers into this weekend’s NAIA national tournament

By George Ferguson
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For the last four or five years, the Montana State University-Northern wrestling team has been an NAIA national powerhouse, and the Lights have proved that by finishing in the top three at the last two NAIA national tournaments.

And going into this season, more hardware from the national tourney was certainly the goal. However, injuries have bitten the Lights all season long, and while they are going into this week’s 2015 NAIA national tournament in Topeka, Kansas, with the same goals they started with all the way back in November, getting that hardware has become a tad more difficult for the fifth-ranked Lights.

The national tournament starts Thursday morning and runs through Saturday night, and the Lights will send out six wrestlers for the event. That will make keeping up with three-time defending national champion Grand View, as well as second-ranked Southern Oregon and third-ranked UGF a little more difficult, because those teams have an average of 11 wrestlers each in the field. But, Northern is still a powerful squad, and the Lights will do all they can to make noise this weekend.

“Obviously this is the conclusion of a season where we were banged up and battered a little,” said Northern head coach Tyson Thivierge. “We are without the services of Jared Miller and I truly believe we would have been taking eight or nine guys with us to compete if we stayed healthy.”

Miller, who had a career-ending hamstring injury two months ago, is a big loss for Northern’s lineup, as he finished second in the national tournament a year ago, and would have likely been Southern Oregon star Brock Gutches top rival at 174 pounds this week.

However, the Lights do bring back three NAIA All-Americans, and a couple of newcomers that could have an impact on the tournament as well.

At the top of Northern’s lineup are two No. 1 seeds in senior Ethan Hinebauch (165) and junior Toby Cheff (HWT). Hinebauch is a three-time All-American already and will certainly be a four-timer after this weekend. But, he’s been ranked No. 1 all season long and has lost just five times all season, and his lone goal this weekend is to win a national championship, after finishing second last season and third in 2013.

“Last year, I thought I could win it, and I didn’t get it done,” Hinebauch said. “This year, I really believe I’m going to win it. It’s a big difference. It’s about my mentality. That’s what it’s about for me.”

A national championship is also the goal for Cheff. He missed the first half of the season with an injury, and as a top seed a year ago, he was upset in the early rounds and didn’t reach the medal stand. However, he’s gone unbeaten since returning to the mat in December, and already has a victory over the No. 2 seed this season. So, like Hinebauch, it’s all about getting to the top of the mountain this week.
“I have to outwork my opponents and go as hard as I can every match,” Cheff said. “That’s the plan. I know exactly what I have to do, I just have to go do it now.”

Cheff, who earned All-American honors in 2013 at 197 pounds, has turned that weight over to Northern sophomore Garrett DeMers, and like Cheff and Hinebauch, DeMers is also gunning for a national title after finishing fifth as a red-shirt freshman. DeMers has had a great season, including beating top-ranked Charles Johnson of SOU in the 197-pound regional championship two weeks ago in Havre. That was DeMers first goal, and now he’s on to the next one.

“That was one goal,” DeMers said after winning the regional title. “And now it’s on to my next goal which is to win a national championship.”

At 184 pounds, the Lights have junior Willie Miller. Ranked at No. 3 for much of the season, Miller is a wildcard entry into the national tourney because he couldn't compete at regionals due to an injury. But before Miller got hurt, he was dominant in his first season in NAIA wrestling, and the former Chinook state champion is certainly capable of making a run at All-American status this weekend in Topeka.

And the upper weights are where Northern will do almost all of its damage. Junior Cole McArthur finished third at 174 pounds in the regional, and the former NJCAA All-American, who transferred to MSU-N last fall, will certainly be a factor this weekend, and could very well get on the All-American podium if he wrestles as well as he did at regionals two weeks ago. Rounding out Northern's lineup this weekend is sophomore Tommy Cooper at 157 pounds. Cooper is making his first trip to nationals, and received a wildcard entry to get there, after the West region’s coaches recognized how well he’s been wrestling at the end of the season.

“Injuries are unpredictable, and I really feel that this group rebounded and met the adversity head on,” Thivierge said. “I expect all six of our competitors to have a quality tournament. They have worked so hard to get to this point.”

The Lights have worked hard, and they have been a powerhouse all season long. And even though only six wrestlers are in Kansas this weekend, Northern will still be one of the teams to make noise, one way or another. Yes, Grand View is a heavy favorite, and UGF and SOU are deep, but the Lights have plenty of firepower still, and now, there’s only one thing left to.

“We just have to go out and wrestle,” Thivierge said. “We have to start fast and finish strong.”

The 2015 NAIA national tournament will begin Friday morning at 10 am. M.S.T. at the Kansas Expo Center in Topeka. The tournament will conclude with the finals Saturday night. The top three scoring teams will be awarded trophies at the national tournament, and the top eight wrestlers in each weight class will earn NAIA All-American honors.

**Lights ready for nationals**

**MSU-N National Tourney Quick Facts:** The Lights are ranked No. 5 in the NAIA. Northern has won six NAIA national championship, in 1991, 1992, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2004. Since 1982, the Lights have produced 30 individual NAIA national champions, including head coach Tyson Thivierge, who won the 184-pound national title and was named the NAIA’s Most Outstanding Wrestler in 2002. Havre’s Evan Hinebauch was the last Light to capture a national title. He won the 184-pound title in 2011. He was also the last MSU-N wrestler to earn All-American honors four straight times, and his younger brother, Ethan will attempt to equal that feat this weekend. In Thivierge’s first six seasons at Northern, he has produced 25 NAIA All-Americans, and led the Lights to back-to-back top-three finishes.

**157 – Tommy Cooper (26-23)**

Cooper, a former standout at Laurel, is making his first trip to the national tourney. He finished fifth at the regional tournament two weeks ago in Havre, and received a wildcard entry to Topeka. In only his second year of varsity wrestling, Cooper has come on strong in the second half of the season and may be a dark horse in his bracket this weekend. The bracket includes returning national champ Joe Cozart of Lindsey Wilson, as well as top-ranked Dallas Houchins of Grand View and regional rivals Dalton Urrutia of SOU and
Chad Cebulski of UGF. Former All-American Zach Skates of Oklahoma City is also in the loaded bracket. Cooper will start his tournament off against eighth-ranked Tristan Macri of Cumberlands College.

165 – Ethan Hinebauch (46-5)

Hinebauch has done everything he can as a collegiate wrestler – except win the national title. A year ago, he was upset by Grand View’s Chad Lowman in the championship match, and now he’s back for redemption. He’s got the second-most pins in the NAIA this season and has been ranked No. 1 from start to finish. And while he does have second-ranked Jimmie Schleusser, a two-time All-American at 174 pounds, and regional rival Eric Lopez of Menlo in his bracket this week, there’s no denying that Hinebauch is the unquestioned favorite to bring home a national championship. Hinebauch will start his quest for a national title with St. Andrew’s Isaac King in the second round.

174 – Cole McArthur (9-8)

In his first year at Northern, McArthur saw limited action in the varsity lineup, but he stepped up big at the regional tournament, and now he’s on the big stage. And like at regionals, McArthur is also in the premier bracket at the national tournament, because that bracket has SOU three-time national champion Brock Gutches in it. And while Gutches will certainly be in the final Saturday night, attempting to reach the rare air of four national titles, McArthur is on the opposite side of the draw, meaning he could fight his way into the quarterfinals, or even semifinals and beyond. UGF’s Shaun Lau and Grand View’s Thomas Moman are also standouts in the draw, but with the way McArthur wrestled two weeks ago at the regional tourney, he has a great chance to do some damage this weekend. McArthur will face either Bryant Guillen of Baker or Daniel Toth of Cumberlands in the second round.

184 – Willie Miller (22-8)

In what is a wide-open 184-pound bracket, Miller would have been one of the top seeds had it not been for a broken jaw he suffered nearly two months ago. But if he can wrestle through the pain this week, the former Chinook Sugarbeeter great could still do what he set out to do at the start of the season. Lindsey Wilson’s Michael Pixley is the top seed in the tournament, while Embry-Riddle’s Jose Cruz III is the West Region champion. But there’s no one in the tournament that Miller will be scared to face, and if he can build some momentum, and shake off the rust of not wrestling for six weeks, he’ll have a chance to go as far as anyone in the field. Miller will wrestle Bacone’s Chris Berry in the opening round.

197 – Garrett DeMers (44-9)

A red-shirt sophomore, DeMers is riding high heading into the national tournament. He knocked off SOU’s Charles Johnson in the regional final two weeks ago, and he’d had a healthy and productive season. He also made a run to the semifinals a year ago, and now he comes into his second national tournament as a top seed and a legitimate national title contender. Dickinson State’s Hudson Buck is currently ranked No. 1, while DeMers is No. 2 and Johnson No. 3. Those three are the favorites this week, in a bracket that doesn’t include many returning All-Americans. So, if DeMers wrestles up to his capabilities, a national championship is certainly within his grasp. DeMers will wrestle Morningside’s Jared McCoy in the first round.

HWT – Toby Cheff (14-0)

Cheff is simply one of the best upper-weight wrestlers in the NAIA, and though he’s giving away weight to most of his competitors in the heavyweight division, it’s mattered none. He’s 14-0 on the season and he beat second-ranked Scott Brasil of Menlo in the regional championship two weeks ago. Cheff, who’s in phenomenal shape since returning from injury, comes into this weekend as the top seed, and he’ll look for redemption after being upset at the national tourney a year ago.
ago. Brasil, Grand View’s Dean Borghammer and Missouri Valley’s Gabi Musallam are all top seeds as well, but Cheff has already bested each of them at least once in the last two months. He’ll begin his march to a national championship with either Daniel Mullam of Missouri Valley or Angel Gomez of Waldorf in the second round.