

Backup wrestlers shining for team

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It's the part of the Penn State wrestling team that does not get very much attention or glory.

With the caliber of wrestlers in the Nittany Lions' starting lineup, being able to wrestle consistently is very hard with only 10 spots to wrestle in each dual.

But there is still a roster full of very capable wrestlers.

Five of those wrestlers will be making the trip with the team to West Lafayette, Ind., for this weekend's Big Ten tournament.

Coach Cael Sanderson said it was a very tough decision to make when he finalized his travel list on Tuesday.

"It's a big deal, these guys want to travel, but we have to cover all of our weight classes," the coach said.

Clay Steadman, Matt Brown, Dirk Cowburn, Andrew Alton and Jordan Conaway will all be making the trip with the rest of the team.

For Steadman, who is a senior, the trip will be recognition for his contributions to the team throughout his career.

"For example, Clay Steadman, he is a senior this year and hasn't been able to wrestle for two years and we can only travel a few guys to the Big Ten tournament but he is one of the guys we are taking," Sanderson said. "He is a positive, happy, fun guy and that's what we want."

The coach said Steadman's attitude is something the coaching staff thought was important and they wanted him to be around the team

And for the other younger wrestlers making the trip, they will be gaining valuable experience for future years.

Freshman 125-pounder Nico Megaludis said he asked the coaching staff if his classmate Conaway could make the trip.

The two are workout buddies and Conaway will help warm up Megaludis before he wrestles this weekend.

"I like wrestling with him, he's scrappy and he's tough," Megaludis said of Conaway.

But the backup wrestlers will be more than simply spectators along for the ride.

"They are still a part of the team and their actions and the attitude they bring with us or with what they bring to practice everyday is critical," Sanderson said.

While they will serve as warmup partners, perhaps the biggest thing the backup wrestlers bring to the team is a relaxed attitude.

Quentin Wright said the reserves help keep the mood light and help ensure the starters are not overstressed prior to matches.

“You don’t want to be tense, you want to be relaxed and ready to go when you step out on the mat,” the defending national champion said.

Sanderson also stressed the importance of his team having fun and enjoying the ride that it’s on.

During the coach’s press conference at Tuesday’s practice, many of the wrestlers were running around, cheerfully playing dodge ball in the Lorenzo Wrestling Complex prior to practice.

“They kind of realize it’s fun and to do things well you’ve got to do things seriously but it helps to enjoy them,” Sanderson said “You don’t need to be on guard, on call 24 hours a day.

The coach credited David Taylor with the attitude he brings to practice on a daily basis to help the team have fun and laugh.

But come Saturday morning, the lights of the Big Ten tournament will be shining bright down on Penn State.

And the backup wrestlers will be there to do whatever is necessary to help their teammates relax and warm up prior to matches.

That’s because for everyone on the roster, the ultimate goal of winning a national title is all that matters.

“It just goes to show with everybody that it’s a team and only 10 guys get to wrestle but if we win the nationals everybody gets a ring,” Sanderson said.