

Preseason Outlook

Oklahoma State entered the 2006 season in the unprecedented position of having four defending NCAA champions in its lineup and thus was a clear favorite to capture its fourth straight team title. The Cowboys' formidable lineup included returning champions Zach Esposito, Johny Hendricks, Jake Rosholt and Steve Mocco, plus All-Americans Coleman Scott and Daniel Frishkorn. The Pokes' biggest challenge might come from in-state rival Oklahoma, led by two-time NCAA champion Teyon Ware. Sooner mentor Jack Spates felt he had perhaps his best team in his 17 years at the helm: "We're not aiming for second place. We think we can compete with anyone."

Michigan, runner-up to OSU in 2005, defending Big Ten champion Illinois and a young, but very talented Minnesota squad were expected to challenge the Oklahoma schools for the team crown. Each of these Big Ten schools had a pair of brothers that were All-American candidates – the Churellas at Michigan, the Tirapelles at Illinois and the Schlatters at Minnesota. Lehigh was seeking its fifth straight EIWA crown and would face a stiff challenge from Cornell, which was coming off its first top five finish in the NCAA tournament in half a century. Lehigh could count on 2004 NCAA champion Troy Letters and three other All-Americans. Cornell had three-time All-American Dustin Manotti and super freshman Troy Nickerson.

Regular Season

The fortieth anniversary NWCA All-Star Classic in Stillwater highlighted November's action. While just an exhibition, the meet gave some indication that Oklahoma State's path to the team title might not be all that smooth — three of its four defending champions were upset. Minnesota wrestlers scored a pair of upsets as Matt Nagle and Cole Konrad scored overtime victories against Johny Hendricks and Steve Mocco. For Mocco, it was his first collegiate loss, albeit unofficial, since the 2002 NCAA final. Michigan repeated as team champion of the Cliff Keen Las Vegas Invitational and finished nearly 30 points ahead of Cornell. Iowa ended Iowa State's short two-meet winning streak in their dual meet series with a 20-15 victory. The key win for the Hawkeyes came at 184 pounds, where Paul Bradley topped Kurt Backes 8-5. Oklahoma State downed Oklahoma 23-12 in the first Bedlam dual of the season to extend its unbeaten streak to 22 meets in college wrestling's greatest rivalry. The Pokes trailed 12-11 after seven bouts before Rusty Blackmon started their comeback with a 6-3 upset of Justin Dyer.

Minnesota won the Southern Scuffle by nearly 50 points against a very strong field that included runner-up Missouri, Cornell, Edinboro and Lehigh. The Engineer's Troy Letters suffered a neck injury at the tournament that would sideline him for most of the season and limit his effectiveness when he returned. Oklahoma State struggled in Iowa City but finally prevailed against the Hawkeyes 18-14, although Ty Eustice upset Zack Esposito 4-2. However, the Cowboys had less luck on their next visit to Iowa and lost 21-14 to Minnesota in the finals of the Cliff Keen NWCA National Duals at Cedar Falls. Cole Konrad clinched the meet for the Gophers with a fall against Steve Mocco. Konrad's teammate, freshman Dustin Schlatter capped off a brilliant weekend with an 8-7 upset of

the second ranked Esposito. The Gopher yearling had already scored upsets against #3 Jon Masa of Hofstra and #4 Mark DiSalvo of Central Michigan.

One week later, Schlatter added a 4-1 win against top ranked Ty Eustice in Minnesota's 25-9 victory over Iowa. In the span of one week, Schlatter defeated the four wrestlers previously ranked above him and established himself as the top freshman in the country. Another outstanding true freshman, Troy Nickerson of Cornell, helped the Big Red score their first dual meet win against Lehigh in nearly a decade, 19-14 in Ithaca. Michigan handed Illinois its first loss of the season by a one point margin, thanks to a pin by heavyweight Greg Wagner in the final bout. Northwestern added to the Illini's woes two days later by scoring a 19-16 upset.

In the inaugural ESPNU Double Dual, Minnesota scored a 19-16 triumph over Oklahoma State, at Oklahoma City's Ford Center, site of the 2006 NCAA tournament. Dustin Schlatter and Cole Konrad continued their mastery of NCAA champions Zack Esposito and Steve Mocco. This time Schlatter dominated Esposito with an 11-2 major decision. Oklahoma State bounced back with a 21-12 Bedlam triumph at Norman, but Minnesota suffered its first loss of the season against Michigan, 19-15 in Ann Arbor. Iowa finished up its season with a pair of wins against Northwestern and Boise State, but its dual meet record of 11-7 was its worst since 1967.

Conference Tournaments

Minnesota dethroned defending Big Ten team champion Illinois by sweeping its three head-to-head finals match-ups with the Illini. The Gophers were one point in arrears entering the final round, but won four of their six finals while their rivals went winless. Minnesota finished with 138 points, 13 ahead of Illinois, to annex its fifth team crown in the last eight years. Dustin Schlatter of Minnesota routed Troy Tirapelle of Illinois 14-0 at 149 pounds to put the Gophers in the lead for good. C.P. Schlatter topped Alex Tirapelle of Illinois 5-2 at 157 as the Schlatters swept the battle of the brothers. Gopher Roger Kish defeated Pete Friedl of Illinois 3-1 at 184 to clinch the team title for Minnesota. Ryan Churella of Michigan won his third Big Ten title and Nick Simmons of Michigan State and Cole Konrad of Minnesota claimed their second. Tom Clum of Wisconsin edged defending 133-pound champion Mack Reiter of Minnesota in overtime and was named Outstanding Wrestler. Iowa finished sixth in the team race, its worst showing in four decades.

Oklahoma State dominated the Big Twelve tournament, crowning four champions and finishing nearly 30 points ahead of runner-up Oklahoma, which edged Nebraska by half a point. Cowboy Zack Esposito won his third straight title at 149 pounds and teammates Nathan Morgan, Johnny Hendricks and Steve Mocco were repeat winners. Nate Gallick of Iowa State and B.J. Padden of Nebraska also defended their Big Eight titles at 141 and 197 pounds. Gallick was named Outstanding Wrestler by edging defending NCAA champion Teyon Ware of Oklahoma 5-3 in the second tiebreaker period. Padden won his crown by shutting out another NCAA champion, Jake Rosholt of Oklahoma State, 4-0.

Lehigh won its fifth straight EIWA team title, a feat last achieved in 1935 when the Engineers completed a string of five titles. Lehigh topped Cornell by 15 points, despite the fact that senior leaders Derek Zinck and Troy Letters finished third and fourth. A strong team performance, with nine of ten wrestlers finishing in the top four, enabled Lehigh to continue its dominance of collegiate wrestling's oldest conference. Engineer Cory Cooperman won his third title and Travis

Frick and Matt Cassidy also claimed crowns. Cornell won a single individual title as Troy Nickerson used a late takedown to edge Matt Fisk of Lehigh 2-1 at 125-pounds. Dustin Manotti of Cornell, who would become a four-time All American two weeks later in Oklahoma City, was knocked unconscious nine seconds into his 157-pound final with Andrew Flanagan of Harvard and failed to win an EIWA crown in four attempts. Muzaffar Abdurakhmanov of American won a second EIWA title at 165-pounds and was named Outstanding Wrestler.

NCAA Tournament

The tournament returned to Oklahoma City for the first time in more than a decade, with the University of Oklahoma serving as host in the brand new Ford Center. Minnesota, on the strength of its two dual meet victories over Oklahoma State, was favored by many to end the Cowboys' three-year reign as team champion. However, Oklahoma State had a veteran squad competing in its home state and four defending NCAA champions, although none of them were seeded first. Each team had six wrestlers seeded in the top six, with the Pokes having one more qualifier. Oklahoma was the only other school with five or more wrestlers seeded sixth or better.

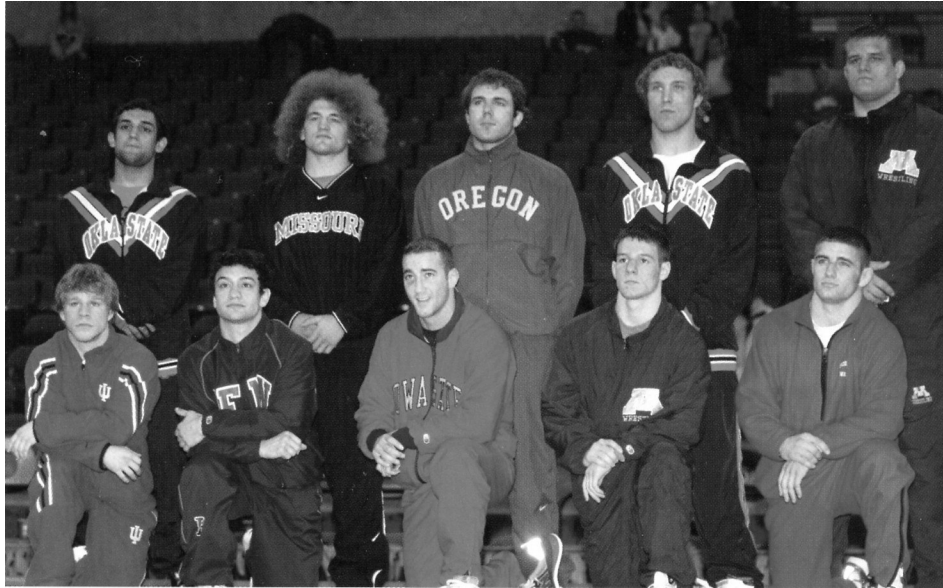
After the first day, Oklahoma State was in the driver's seat with 36½ points and six men in the quarter-finals. Oklahoma was second, 12 points behind the Cowboys, and Edinboro and Hofstra, tied for third with 22½ points, were the surprises of the tournament. Co-favorite Minnesota had three seeded wrestlers lose in the first two rounds and was further back in the pack. C.P. Schlatter, a second seed, was the Gophers' most significant casualty on the first day as he fell to Andrew Flanagan of Harvard 5-3 in second round action. An even bigger upset came at 197 pounds, where top-seeded Wynn Michalak of Central Michigan was shocked by Chris Weidman of Hofstra 10-7.

The Second Day

At the end of the semi-finals, Oklahoma State had clinched its fourth straight NCAA title by advancing three men to the finals and building up an insurmountable 33 point lead on Minnesota. Three of the Pokes' four defending champions reached the finals, but Zack Esposito dropped a 7-4 decision to Ty Eustice of Iowa in the semi-finals. Johnny Hendricks and Steve Mocco advanced with narrow one-point victories, while Jake Rosholt scored a quick fall in 1:04. Rosholt's path to a third NCAA crown was eased when his nemesis, B.J. Padden of Nebraska, was upset by Phil Davis of Penn State, Rosholt's opponent in the finals, in the quarter-finals.

Minnesota had a pair of finalists, top seeds Dustin Schlatter and Cole Konrad. The latter narrowly avoided an upset, edging Cain Velasquez of Arizona State by time advantage in the second tiebreaker session. Troy Nickerson of Cornell upset number one seed Nick Simmons of Michigan State 2-1 at 125 pounds. Simmons had a 1-0 lead entering the third period and took the top position. Nickerson reversed late in the third period and held on for the victory. A pair of outsiders, fifth seeded Ben Cherrington of Boise State and tenth seeded Brian Stith of Arizona State, reached the finals at 157 pounds, a weight class in which seven of the top eight seeds lost prior to the semi-finals.

The Finals



Defending champion Joe Dubuque of Indiana repeated at 125 pounds with an 8-3 triumph over true freshman Troy Nickerson of Cornell. Dubuque used a takedown in each period to become the Hoosiers' first two-time champion since Charles McDaniel in 1938. Sixth-seeded Matt Valenti of Pennsylvania used riding time to edge Chris Fleeger of Purdue 3-2 and win the 133-pound title. The keys to the victory for Valenti, who defeated three higher seeded wrestlers on his way to the crown, were an incredible counter to Fleeger's first period takedown attempt and a second period ride-out.

With a 3-2 victory at 141 pounds, Nate Gallick of Iowa State avenged a loss to Teyon Ware of Oklahoma in the 2005 final. Gallick, with a career record of 7-1 versus Ware, scored the only takedown of the match in the first period. Dustin Schlatter of Minnesota blanked Ty Eustice of Iowa 4-0 to win the 149-pound title. The Gopher true freshman surrendered a mere two points in five matches on his way to the title.

Ben Cherrington of Boise State became just the second Bronco wrestler to win an NCAA title with a 7-3 victory over Brian Stith of Arizona State at 157 pounds. Cherrington, who missed much of the season with an injury, had little trouble capturing a weight class that saw numerous upsets. Johny Hendricks of Oklahoma State defended his 165-pound title with an exciting and controversial 9-8 win over Ryan Churella of Michigan. Hendricks overcame a 7-4 deficit entering the third period with a pair of takedowns, the last with four seconds left in the match. Hendricks had no difficulty penetrating Churella's defenses with his single leg attacks, but the ensuing scrambles always seemed to end up at the edge of the mat with Hendricks the beneficiary of a close takedown call.

Ben Askren of Missouri captured the 174-pound, after finishing runner-up the last two seasons, by dominating previously undefeated Jake Herbert of Northwestern 14-2. Askren, the Tigers' first ever NCAA champion, was named the Outstanding Wrestler of the tournament. At 184 pounds, Shane Webster won Oregon's first title in nearly four decades by edging Roger Kish of Minnesota 3-2 with a takedown in the final minute of action.

History of Collegiate Wrestling

Jake Rosholt of Oklahoma State became the Cowboy's fourteenth three-time NCAA champion by downing Phil Davis of Penn State 9-3 at 197 pounds. Rosholt won his first title at 184 pounds in 2003 and added a crown at 197 pounds last season. Cole Konrad of Minnesota continued his season long command of defending 285-pound champion Steve Mocco of Oklahoma State with a 5-2 victory in overtime. Konrad scored an escape and takedown in the second tiebreaker period to capture the Gopher's second individual title.

Oklahoma State finished nearly 40 points ahead of runner-up Minnesota and John Smith became the first Cowboy coach since the legendary Edward Gallagher to win four straight team titles. The Gophers edged out Oklahoma for second, thanks to Konrad's victory over Mocco. With two champions each, OSU and Minnesota were the only schools in the top ten to crown an individual champion. Indiana, Penn, Boise State, Missouri and Oregon, schools not accustomed to having wrestlers at the top of the podium, all had an individual title winner.

Iowa head coach Jim Zalesky was fired shortly after the end of the seasons, despite leading the Hawkeyes to a fourth place finish in the NCAA tournament. His termination and the retirement of Russ Hellickson at Ohio State initiated an extraordinary series of coaching changes. Tom Brands left Virginia Tech after just two seasons to take the helm at Iowa. His first step was to convince Dan Gable to become his assistant. Bobby Douglas stepped aside at Iowa State to make way for Cael Sanderson and Zalesky ended up at Oregon State. Tom Ryan, who had just led Hofstra to its best ever finish in the NCAA tournament, took over at Ohio State. In the East, Lehigh lost its two assistant coaches as Chris Ayres assumed the top spot at Princeton and Jason Kutz became head coach at East Stroudsburg.