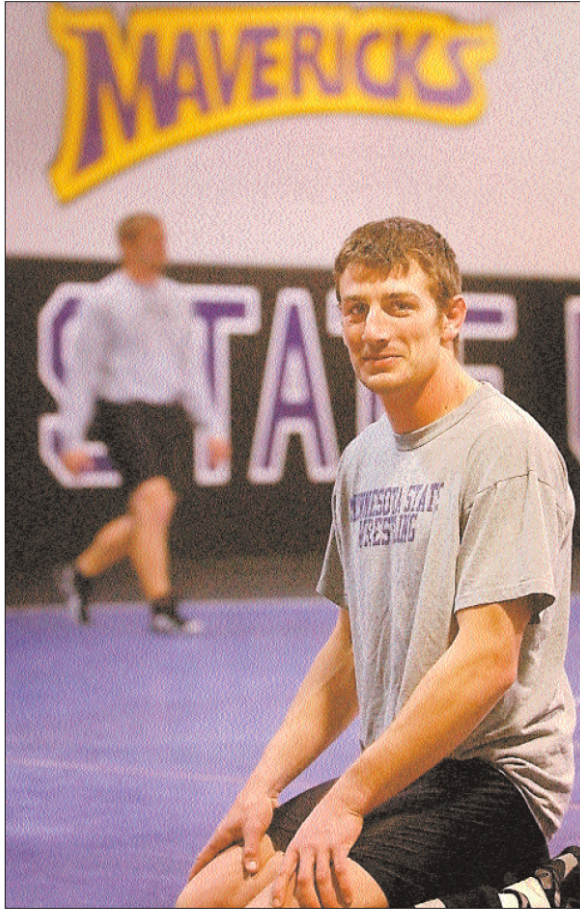




Sports

MINNESOTA STATE WRESTLING PREVIEW



John Cross

Minnesota State University wrestler Jason Rhoten is finally healthy and he's looking to go all the way at 140 pounds this season. Rhoten is ranked third in the NCAA Division II preseason poll.

Recovered Rhoten rarin' to go

Junior back from leg injury; team loaded for 2006-07 season

By Jim Rueda
Free Press Sports Editor

MANKATO — The days of the Minnesota State University wrestling team hoping to merely contend for a conference championship or a high placing in the regional tournament are long gone.

Nowadays, the Mavericks are setting their sights as high as possible

— winning an NCAA Division II national championship. Looking at their roster, the Mavs just might have the horses to accomplish that feat in 2006-07.

MSU has gone 30-5 in dual meets over the last two seasons and is coming off a fifth-place finish nationally. This year's roster includes five All-Americans, three more national qualifiers and a total of seven nation-

ally ranked wrestlers.

One of the more interesting names in the preseason rankings is that of MSU's Jason Rhoten.

Rhoten, a junior, is rated third in the country but has not wrestled in a year and a half due to a serious leg injury.

"I think that shows the kind of respect people have for Jason," MSU coach Jim Makovsky said. "He hasn't wrestled since doctors put a titanium rod in his leg yet he's still rated third."

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WRESTLING: Mavericks open season Saturday

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Rhoten's pre-injury résumé is impressive. He's a two-time All-American who has finished second and fourth at previous national tournaments.

In the spring of last year, Rhoten and some friends were goofing around on a golf course when their cart overturned and his leg was shattered.

"It was June 4, 2005," Rhoten said. "I'm never going to forget that date."

"I tried to come back last year but couldn't make it. In early January I was still limping around when I walked and the trainers advised against my trying to wrestle. At that point I just decided to concentrate on my rehab to make it back this season."

Rhoten says last year was one of the most frustrating of his life. He had to sit on the

sidelines in street clothes and cheer on his teammates without suiting up.

"It was a long season," he said. "I wanted to be out there so bad but it just wasn't going to happen."

Rhoten began wrestling again in earnest the past summer and says the leg is completely healed. "I don't even think about when I'm working out anymore."

Despite his long layoff Rhoten has set a couple of high goals for his junior year. He wants to win an individual national championship and help the team win a national championship, as well.

"In my five years in the program this may be the most talent we've had in the wrestling room," he said. "We have a number of guys who are capable of winning national titles so we're not going to settle for anything less than finishing first in the country."

The other projected starters for MSU this season are returning All-Americans Nick Smith (125 pounds), Jeff Pfaffinger (133), Andy Pickar (165) and Travis Krinkle (184); national qualifiers Efrain Ayala (141), Brandon Girtz (157) and Ben Janike (197) and red-shirt freshman Brady Wilson at heavyweight.

Ayala is being pushed hard by freshman Travis Elg from Windom and fellow freshman Andy Forstner of Madelia-Truman (125) is likely to take a redshirt season.

The 174-pound weight class is the only one that's wide open. The starter is likely to be either sophomore Tim Matheson or freshman Ben Becker.

The 197-pound class features four area wrestlers. In addition to Janike and Tom Block from Waseca, there's Cory Harnitz from Lake

Crystal-Wellcome Memorial and freshman Justin Schwartz from St. James.

The Mavericks open the season Saturday at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Their first home meet is at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 15, at Bresnan Arena.