

WVU Tech 2013-2014 Season Preview

Head wrestling coach Sam Gardner returns for his third season at WVU Tech with something he hasn't had before; a full line-up and depth at every weight!

States Gardner "I'm excited we are finally going to be able to fill every weight class. In the past our guys have all been competitive, winning tournaments, racking up wins individually, but our lack of depth kept us from really being able to represent the program in the way we had hoped. Now, with a full year to recruit and continuity within the program, we will be able to compete with the knowledge that we need not use smoke and mirrors and rely on injuries and attrition to our opponent's squads to have a chance at victory. We can go out there and wrestle with the understanding that a team victory is within reach, and that should help spur greater efforts!"

The Golden Bears will be wrestling a diverse and challenging schedule this year, which will take them from the Bronx, NY to Atlanta, GA and many states in between. Tech has 17 dual meets on the schedule, and will host teams like Tennessee Temple, St. Andrews (NC), Calumet College of St. Joseph (IN), Truett-McConnell (GA), and Ohio Valley University at the Baisi Athletic Center in December, January, and February. In addition to the aggressive duals schedule the Golden Bears will compete in a number of regular season tournaments, including the inaugural WVU Collegiate States at West Liberty and the USCAA National Tournament at Penn State University.

"Our guys will have plenty of opportunities to get out there, compete hard, and show their skills. We've made every attempt to give them a full-spectrum of competition to challenge them and enhance their development both on and off the mats," said Gardner. "We have very high expectations for this team, and expect them to train and compete at a level we haven't seen here at Tech before. It is a challenge I've issued to them, and I believe they are attacking this challenge with great spirits and energy."

What follows is a weight-by-weight breakdown of the individual weight classes.

125

A number of freshmen will battle for the starting spot at the lightest weight class. Naiheem Knight (Snow Hill, Md.) one half of two sets of twins on the Tech squad, was a Maryland State finalist in 2013 and a two-time place-winner at the States. Devon Steele (Midland Trail, W. Va.), Denis Robles (High Point, Md.) and Robbie Patterson (LaPlata, Md.) were state qualifiers, and Jasi Coureur of Indiana brings national level competitive experience to campus.

Coach Gardner: "It will be nice to have one option, let alone more than one option, at 125 this year. Each guy brings something different to the mix as far as body type and skills, so it will be interesting to see how these guys sort out."

133

There are five student-athletes at 133 lbs who will be competing for the starting nod. Two of them are very familiar with one another, as Paul and Chris Gonzales (Snow Hill, Md.) are the second set of twins on the roster. Alfred “Wolfdog” Martinez (Dundalk, Md.) was a multiple time Regional Champion in Maryland, Jeffrey Bayonne of Florida was a state qualifier for Palm Bay H.S., and Robbie McNeil of Winslow Twp. H.S. (home of Olympic and World Champion Jordan Burroughs) was 40-0 before a season ending injury. All five will likely see action in the starting line-up.

Coach Gardner: “All five of these guys are tough and talented. This looks to be one of the most even weight classes we have. Whoever establishes themselves as the top guy at the weight will have earned it the hard way, and will be battle tested come East Regional time.”

141

Three first year student-athletes will be jockeying among themselves to represent the Golden Bears this season. Connor Russ (Canastota, Ny.) stands out at this weight, mainly because he is over six feet tall. Two Florida natives, Tyler Sierra and Alejandro Smith, both state qualifiers, will be in the mix as well.

Coach Gardner: “I’m not sure which one of these guys will seize the opportunity in front of them. I know that there is talent in this group, I’m just waiting to see which guy wants it the most, which guy is willing to work the hardest, put in the most time, to rise to the top. The guy who does that I’m sure will make us tough at that weight.”

149

Team Captain and three-year starter John Walters will get the nod here early on. A four time place winner in his home state of Delaware, John qualified for the NAIA’s as a freshman, has won numerous tournaments, and is a two-time NAIA and NWCA Academic All-American. Backing up Walters will be two-time Georgia state qualifier Chris Rapley.

Coach Gardner: “John Walters is a legend here at Tech. A nicer, kinder, more gentle and conscientious person you will not find on this campus. His hard work and love of wrestling sets an example for the young guys on this team to emulate. A young guy like Rapley is in a great position to learn from one of the best guys I’ve had the honor of coaching.”

157

This is a deep weight for the Golden Bears this coming season. Led by returning starter Dirk Ponchak (McConellsville, Oh.) who is dropping down from 165 lbs., there are five athletes who can go at this weight. Ponchak was a key starter last year winning several tournaments and winning key bouts at and above his natural weight-class for the sake of the team. Colton Rowe (Huntingtown, Md.) is a second generation WVU Tech student and was a multiple time place winner in the Maryland States. RJ Elam from Liberty HS. (W. Va.) was fourth in the states and qualified a number of times, and Raheem Knight (Snow Hill, Md.) was a multiple time Maryland

state qualifier and is the larger half of the Knight twins. Tanner “Thunder” Bolt of Fayetteville, W. Va. rounds out the squad at this weight.

Coach Gardner: “I feel very good about Dirk’s decision to drop to 157 this year. He was a little small for 165 last year as the season progressed, and I believe his physical skills will be better put to use at this lower weight. Colton comes from a wrestling family and understands what training at the next level entails. RJ is not very flashy, but he is strong and tough and along with Tanner provides excellent depth.”

165

Four student-athletes will work together to establish this weight as one to be watched. Leading the way is USMMA transfer Connar Zimmerman (LaPlata, Md.). Connar was a State champion as a senior, following up a runner-up finish as a junior. Bryan Overton of Hammond H.S. (Md.) finished third and fourth in the Maryland States, and brings a fluid style in contrast to the more physical Zimmerman. Kyle Shepherd of Bakersfield, California qualified two times for the largest single class tournament in the nation. Giovanni Lins of Miami, Florida has been singled out for his work-ethic and desire during the pre-season.

Coach Gardner: “Any one of these guys could start for any number of NAIA, Div. II, or Div. III teams and do very well for themselves. Luckily we’ve got all four guys here at Tech. Iron will sharpen iron, there is no doubt. The NAIA allows you to enter 12 student-athletes in the East Regional, and I wouldn’t be surprised if we didn’t have two entries from this weight class in February.”

174

Junior Al Yasin (Pittsburgh, Pa.) returns for a third year, but for the first time he will have a number of tough young guys to train with on a daily basis. West Virginia State Champion Zach Nibert of Point Pleasant brings an exciting style to the mat. Kaleem Smith (High Point, Md.) and TJ Barnes (Oakdale, Md.) both qualified for the State Tournament as seniors, and John Miller of Grennbrier, W. Va. returns from injury holding similar credentials. Franklin Jahre Jordan from Havre DeGrace, Md. adds a bit more depth.

Coach Gardner: “I believe Zach Nibert is a great get for us. He’s talented, smart and hardworking, and he’s had success at every level. Fortunately for him he has several young and talented guys like Kaleem and TJ who are going to push him to get better if he wants to be the man at this weight at the season’s end.”

184

Maryland natives and Freshmen Tola Morakinyo (Wilde Lake H.S.) and Aaron Wallace (Old mill H.S.) will anchor this weight for the Golden Bears. Morakinyo is a multi-talented athlete who finished second in the Maryland States as a senior. Wallace, from a traditional Maryland powerhouse program won the Anne Arundel County Championship as a senior. There is a possibility that an athlete from 174 may move up to provide additional depth as the season moves on.

Coach Gardner: “Two superbly talented guys who are willing to work hard in class and on the mats. Wallace is a raw talent with surprising strength and he will only get stronger as he continues to work. Tola is a really entertaining and fun guy to have compete for you. He can do things you don’t expect a guy at his size to do, and he can do them well. It is my job to help these guys harness their talents, train em’ up, and point them in the right direction. The wins will pile up between these two if I can do that.”

197

Three wrestlers will jockey to see who represents the team at the seasons end. Terry Nance (Parkdale, Md.) finished 5th in the state of Maryland as a senior, with a 38-5 record, and is hungry to take the next step in his career. Peter Burbank was a County finalist and a District Champion out of Nutley, Nj. as a senior, his first full-year as a starter. Alex Lecroy of Chapman H.S. (SC) finished in fourth place in the states as a Senior.

Coach Gardner: “With three very different body-types I’m interested to see who seizes the opportunity at this weight. My guess is that right now they are all pretty close in ability, so it will be the one who does the extra stuff that will probably rise to the top. Terrible Terry Nance is a powerful kid who can wrestle some, and I expect really good things from him. Peter Burbank is raw, but he’s mentally and physically pretty tough, so if he learns to wrestle he’ll be very good. Alex is very different from the other two in terms of build and body type, but I can see him giving people fits with the style that he wrestles.”

285

Big Jon Boarman of LaPlata, Md. and Wyatt Norfolk of North Dorchester, Md. will provide the talent at heavyweight this year. Boarman was twice a runner-up in the State Tournament for LaPLata. Norfolk, once a lanky 182 lb. wrestler in high school, has filled out his 6 ft. 4 in. frame and is now a growing heavyweight.

Coach Gardner: “I’m excited about these guys competing for us. Boarman is a proven heavy, having competed nationally in the past. He’s a substantial kid, in the upper 250’s, but is very fit and carry’s a ton of muscle. Wyatt’s long build and funky wrestling style will confuse a lot of big men he faces. We haven’t had a big man in the line-up since 2011, and I feel good knowing we’ve got two guys battling for that spot.”