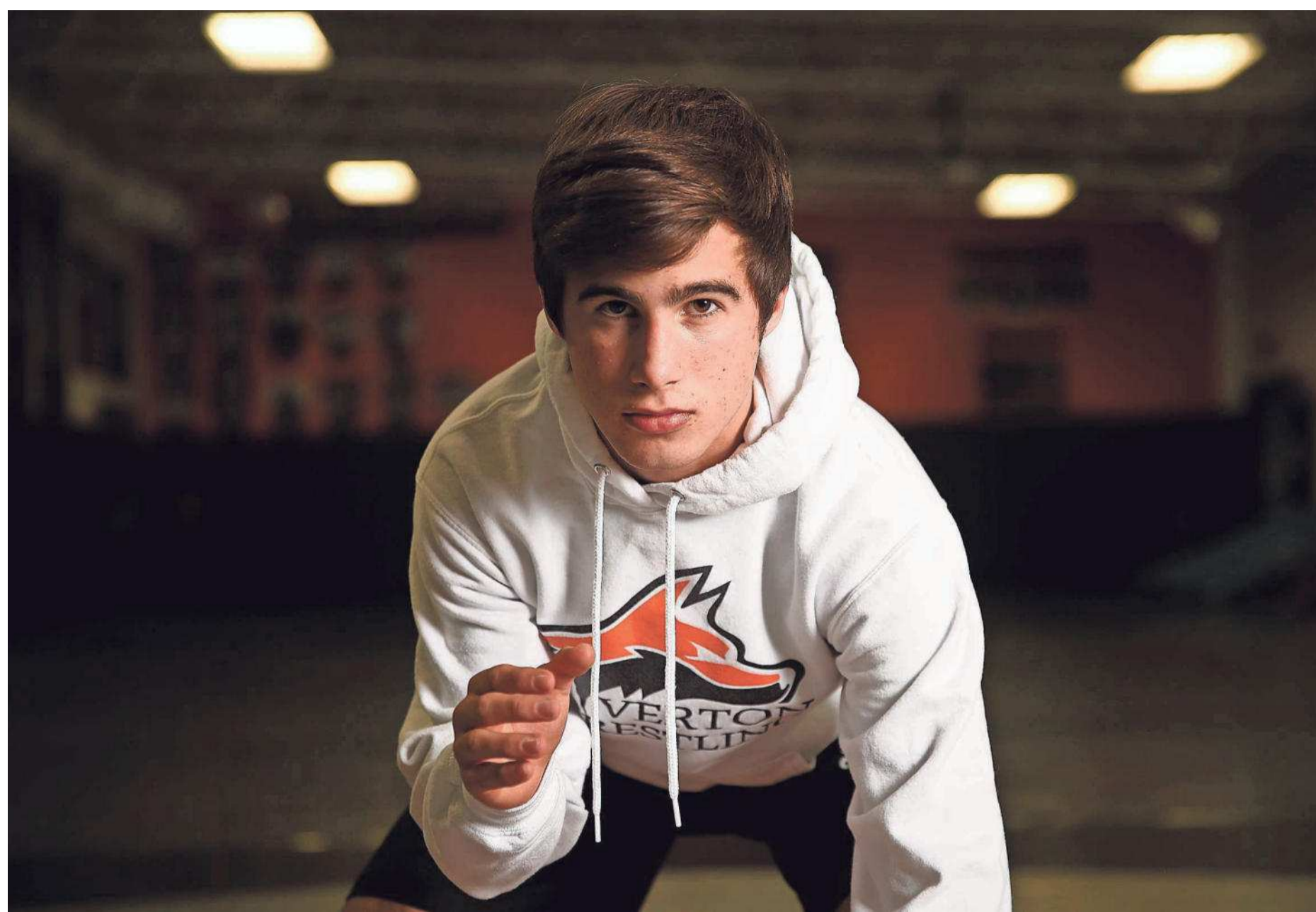


WRESTLING

BIGGER, STRONGER

Champion Kaden Kuenzi headlines Silverton squad



Silverton's Kaden Kuenzi had a 42-2 overall record last season. He has moved up to the 120-pound weight division. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

GARY HOROWITZ SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL | USA TODAY NETWORK

When Kaden Kuenzi was 6 years old he joined the Silverton Mat Club to see if wrestling was something he might enjoy. • Good decision. • “I tried it and I got hooked,” Kuenzi said. • These days Kuenzi is one of the state’s premier wrestlers at any weight. He won the OSAA Class 5A state championship at 106 pounds last February to become the first Silverton High School freshman to win a state title in decades. • Two weeks later Kuenzi was back on the mat, competing as part of the Salem Area All-Stars against members of the Ukrainian Junior National Team in an event called the “Friendship Duals” at Sprague High School.

The Ukrainians won 12 of the 13 matches in dominant fashion. The one exception came at 101 pounds where Kuenzi posted a 10-0 technical fall victory.

What made Kuenzi’s performance even more impressive is the format was freestyle wrestling, which differs slightly from collegiate wrestling used in American colleges and high schools.

“It’s a self-confidence booster, especially knowing that you can beat some of the best guys in the world,” Kuenzi said.

Several of the Ukrainian wrestlers figure to represent their country in future Olympic Games.

Silverton coach Stryder Davis attributed Kuenzi’s win to having the right mindset.

“Before Kaden’s match a lot of the kids were scared. These were world class Ukrainian wrestlers,” Davis said. “I just told Kaden the reason they’re getting their butts kicked is because they’re scared. He kind of bought into that and just believed he could win.”

Kuenzi’s belief that he can win every match stems from the hours he puts into training, both on the mat, in the weight room and running to increase stamina.

As a year-round wrestler – Kuenzi won the Western Regional in Pocatello, Idaho, last June in freestyle at 113 pounds and was third in Greco-Roman – he is comfortable competing in every style.

“Wrestling’s wrestling,” Kuenzi says matter of factly.

Last season Kuenzi had a 42-2 overall record and won state as the No. 4 seed at 106, defeating No. 6 seed Landon Robinson of Redmond by fall in 2:56 of the championship match after beating No. 1 seed Zeth Brower of Crater, 14-11 in the semifinals.

Winning state as a freshman didn’t surprise Kuenzi.

“I was really thankful that my coaches and teammates and parents pushed me to that, but that was my

goal -- to win a state title,” he said. “My goal is to win four.”

And if that happens it likely will come in several different weight classes.

Kuenzi got bigger and stronger over the summer and he’s moved up two weight divisions to 120 for his sophomore season.

“I feel a lot stronger,” Kuenzi said. “I feel like I can control my opponents a lot better just from lifting and doing all those exercises. I’m mentally and physically stronger.”

Which translates into a major challenge for his opponents.

Kuenzi benefits from having quality workout partners in the Silverton wrestling room in senior Jacob Whitehead, the state runner-up at 113 last year, and sophomore Matthew Guenther, who was sixth at 120.

“He puts in a lot of work,” said Guenther, who likely will compete at 138 this season. “He’s fast, he uses good technique and he’s strong. He’s a great workout partner.”

Kuenzi treats each match as an opportunity to improve. If he scores an early takedown, he’ll usually let his opponent up and “take him down again.”

“Some people might think it’s cocky, but for me I just want mat time,” Kuenzi said. “So I’m gonna work on my takedowns, work what I’ve been taught in practice.”

There are lofty goals down the road, like NCAA championships and possibly earning a spot on the U.S. Olympic team. He’s in it for the long haul.

And while wrestling is a team sport, individual matches are a test of will and skill. The wrestling circle is no place for the timid.

“It’s a self-motivating sport,” Kuenzi said. “Working hard every day, getting your hand raised is one of the best feelings. You’ve gotta put in the work to get the result you want.”

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Greater Valley Conference wrestling**McKay**

Coach: Troy Thomas, fourth year.

Last year’s district placing: Ninth.

Key athletes: Zair Ku Beiza, so.; David Rubio, jr.; Anthony Alvarez, so.

Outlook: The team will be young, but is making progress in rebuilding and should be more competitive this season.

McNary

Coach: Jason Ebbs, 15th year.

Last year’s district placing: Seventh.

Key athletes: Brayden Ebbs, sr.; Enrique Vincent, jr.; Jerry Martinez, sr.

Outlook: The Celtics have some strong individual wrestlers who will challenge for state championships.

North Salem

Coach: Andy Pickett, eighth year.

Last year’s district placing: Third.

Key athletes: Ian Carlos, jr.; Jorge Ochoa, sr.

Outlook: The Vikings have become one of the top teams in the state, headlined by one of the state’s top wrestlers in Carlos, who was 6A state champion last season at 145 pounds.

South Salem

Coach: Scott DuFault, third year.

Last year’s district placing: Eighth.

Key athletes: Ricky Villarreal, jr.; Ashton Adams, jr.

Outlook: The Saxons have a familiar name in a new role this year with DuFault as head coach. Best known as South Salem’s long-time football coach, he formerly was the wrestling program’s head coach in the 1990s.

Sprague

Coach: Nolan Harris, third year.

Last year’s district placing: GVC champions.

Key athletes: Bollong Joklur, sr.; Daniel McClung, jr.; Michael Murphy, sr.; Santos Cantu III, so.

Outlook: The Olympians won the conference and placed second in the state a year ago and will contend for both championships this season. Cantu III is the defending state champ at 195.

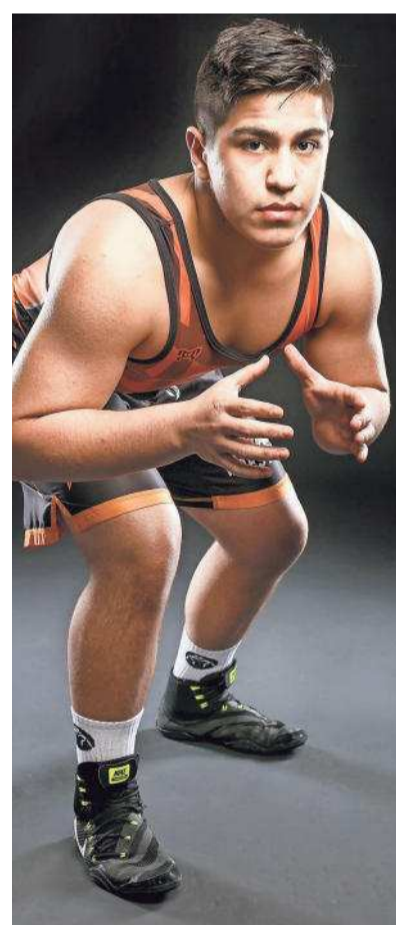
West Salem

Coach: Mikey Baker, fifth year.

Last year’s district placing: Sixth.

Key athletes: Luke Ferschweiler, jr.; Owen Barrett, sr.; Sebastian De Leon, Mason Meredith, sr.

Outlook: The Titans have a strong group of seniors and have developed a deep roster that should see the team improve significantly.



Sprague’s Santos Cantu III was 6A state champion at 195 pounds last season. PHOTO BY ALEX MILAN TRACY

Also in the West Albany placed second in the conference last season and will be tough to beat. GVC:

Mid-Valley conferences

Mid-Willamette Conference: Dallas is the favorite to win the league championship again with a group including senior Treve Earhart, a state runner-up last season. Silverton returns state placers including Kaden Kuenzi, a state champion, Jacob Whitehead and Matthew Guenther and could contend for the top spot in the league. Central returns state placers in Manuel Martinez, Noah Worthington and Caleb Selacek.

4A Special District 2: Sweet Home is the favorite in the league, but Cascade has the athletes to challenge for the top spot. The Cougars have a strong group of seniors including Louie Sanchez, Kade VanDeHeyand James Vanagtamael. Stayton has a couple of athletes who could make an impact in Bailey Archuleta and Clay Dickerson, both district placers.

3A Special District 1: Willamina and Dayton will be tough to beat. Willamina has state placers in Jordan Reyes, Ethan Howard, David Elwood, Noah Sickles and Jordan Mode.

3A Special District 2: Scio is the favorite in the league with a strong lineup. Jefferson returns state placers in Riley Davis and Cody Adams.