

photos by Jonathan Villagomez



Rhoden has led the CCC wrestling program to top 8 national finishes every year since he arrived at the college, including one national championship title. CCC was also the runner up in three of the last four seasons.

gonna do,” Rhoden said. “They hadn’t had a coach for that month and a half and we were just trying to keep those core guys together. We got a chance to talk to four or five of them and we got a couple more on and I think we had 15 guys that first year.”

Out of the 15 wrestlers on the 2006–2007 team, seven qualified for the national championship and the Cougars finished fifth at nationals — the best finish since 1995.

“It was crazy because there were a lot of tumultuous ups and downs. I’m wrestling and coaching ‘cause I’m young enough at that time. I’m wrestling every day, I’m coaching every day because I’m the assistant, I’m the head coach, I’m everything. It’s come a long way since then,” Rhoden said.

In 2008, Clackamas landed two big time recruits in Brett Sanchez from Clovis High School in California and the No. 1 recruit in the country, heavyweight Tyrell Fortune. With that recruiting class Rhoden felt like he was finally gaining some traction towards his goals and in recruiting.

“[2007] felt pretty good, but then once we got to start a full recruiting cycle with our guys, that were our dudes, that started making all the difference. Where the comfort level became, ‘Hey I can do this.’ When I felt like I was going to make it at this level was probably 08–09.”

The 2008–09 team finished third at the NJCAA National Championships, making

the highest finish for the program since 1987 when Clackamas finished second in the nation. The next year Rhoden redshirted the 2008 recruiting class for the 2010 season and it paid off.

Five years after debuting as head man, Rhoden led CCC to its first Wrestling National Championship since 1971 in 2011 and Rhoden won National Coach of the Year.

“Then it became sustaining it, trying to keep up with the Joneses,” Rhoden said. “Getting to the top is hard, don’t get me wrong, I think it’s harder to stay at the top, there’s no question.”

The National Championship marked the beginning of Clackamas’ dominance in this decade as Clackamas has won seven straight National Dual Meet Championships, six straight West District Championships, produced 118 national qualifiers, 68 All-Americans, 20 national finalists, nine national champions and 94 Academic All-Americans.

“I knew all along I wanted to set it apart athletically, but not just that, I was thinking how can we be different academically than [other programs] we’re seeing. These guys aren’t graduating kids, not sending kids on, kids are leaving programs and transferring, so to see all that it was like, ‘Alright we need to be different.’ So, we started doing that and we built a graduation and four-year transfer rate that’s approaching 80 percent.

So, our kids leave and move on.”

Sanchez moved on to Cal State Fullerton and Grand Canyon University after being a part of the 2011 National Champion team, but returned to CCC this fall as the Associate Head Coach.

“Out of all the colleges, I attended three, and this college right here was one of my favorites,” Sanchez said. “I liked the environment, I liked being around Rhoden and [Rich] Vigorito, their energy is contagious, it’s just hard not to be around that. Once I graduated from college I had the goals and ambition to become a coach. I started back in San Diego as a high school coach and a club coach, but I always had the goal of becoming a college coach. I was lucky enough to be here with [Rhoden] and Vigorito and it was hard to say no to it. I’m very happy to be up here.”

It’s through hard work that Rhoden, Sanchez and Vigorito have built his program into a national powerhouse.

“My wife will tell you, ‘There’s no 40-hour work week here,’” Rhoden said during a 7 a.m. weight lifting session. “It’s something more like 80 hours. We’ve put a lot of work into it and we’ve gotten some great kids to say yes to coming here and working with us.”

An average day for the CCC program consists of a 6 a.m. practice, 7 a.m. workout, then as the student-athletes head to class, Rhoden and Sanchez head to the office

NJCAA National Champions
1971 & 2011

NJCAA National Runner Up
1987 | 2015 | 2017 | 2018

West Region Champions
2011 | 2012 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016
2017 | 2018

National Dual Meet Champions
2011 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016
2017 | 2018

to continue the recruiting of next year’s freshman class, followed by individual sessions for some wrestlers, an afternoon workout, then it’s back to the office for a staff conference call to get the next day’s practice plan squared away and one final check-in with the athletes to make sure their diets are right and they’re working out outside of team work.

“Wrestling for Rhoden is great,” said Joel Romero, one of this year’s recruits. “I’m a freshman right now and it’s really cool. I like him a lot. I didn’t think I was going to be comfortable up here cause I’m from California, but he made me feel comfortable here and I love it.”

Rhoden still can’t believe what his life has become at Clackamas, describing it as “feeling like a movie” sometimes. When he first started, it was all about winning, but as the program has grown he has found himself in the business of molding great men more so than great wrestlers.

“Winning is awesome, but what kind of guys are we building?” Rhoden said. “I don’t want to just teach you a good high-crotch because then I’ve failed you. You’re not going to be a good husband, father, brother, friend or community member. Those types of things early on were just part of the culture we had to have to make better people through wrestling.”

The grind it out, hard working mentality Rhoden instilled in his program has payed off over his tenure. This year is a testament to the program Rhoden has built as Clackamas will be represented in all 10 weight classes at the NJCAA National Championships this weekend in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Rhoden’s motto when he started at Clackamas was “fake it till you make it.” With a record of 141–35–2, it’s safe to say Rhoden doesn’t have to fake it anymore.