

Baker wrestlers ready to compete at state

■ Twelve Bulldogs — including three veterans who competed in the 2020 state meet — are wrestling this weekend at Cascade

By **Corey Kirk**

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As practice came to a close on Wednesday, June 23, Baker wrestling coach Brandon Young had his wrestlers gather in a circle in the Baker gym.

Young turned the lights off. “The Last Rebel” by Lynyrd Skynyrd blares from speakers.

Young starts a speech intended to prepare the Bulldogs for the two-day state tournament that would start in two days, on Friday, June 25.

“Think about how you want that story to be told, go out there and give it everything you got,” Young said. “You go down swinging. One of the reasons why we wrestle is when we get our hand raised at the end of that match, and you guys have worked and sacrificed, there’s nothing that feels any better than that.”

After a condensed season concluded with the regional tournament in La Grande, 12 Baker wrestlers qualified for the nonsanctioned state tournament at Cascade High School in Turner, near Salem.

Junior Gavin Stone is no stranger to the state tournament stage, having competed the previous two seasons, including a third-place trophy at 120 pounds in 2020.

(The state wrestling tournament finished just before high school sports were stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

Stone, wrestling this year at 145 pounds, placed fourth at the regional tournament. He’s ready for a strong performance at state.

“I’m excited, I got a good spot in the bracket, I might get to wrestle some of the



Corey Kirk/Baker City Herald

Baker’s Gavin Stone, left, wrestles Ontario’s Marcus Grivajala on June 3. Stone is one of 12 Baker wrestlers who are competing in the state tournament this weekend at Cascade High School near Salem.

same kids, and I’m hoping that I do,” Stone said. “I know that I didn’t quite wrestle to the best that I could at regionals, but I’m at state, and my goal is to win it. Everyone wants it. It’s a whole different tournament.”

Stone is quietly intense. Maintaining a calm but focused demeanor before every match, his goal is to make his opponents fear his name when they see it next to their name on a bracket.

“I want the kid to never wrestle me again, I don’t want to go the full match, I want to hurt him, tech fall him or pin him,” Stone said. “I want to get in and get out. It doesn’t always happen, but it’s wrestling.”

While Stone paces in preparation, right next to him, with his headphones on and occasionally busting out an air drum solo, is fellow junior Gauge Bloomer.

Bloomer, also making his third trip to the state tournament, placed fourth at 160 pounds in 2020.

Bloomer, now wrestling at

195 pounds, said his drum solos are just a part of the routine that keeps him relaxed.

“It’s very important, I remember last year all season I was a very tight wrestler, I wasn’t relaxed or loose at all until the state tournament,” Bloomer said. “I just decided to switch it up, try something new. I’ve just been sticking with it.”

After placing first at the regional tournament, Bloomer is confident.

“I think that I will be able to ride that momentum deep into it,” Bloomer said. “I am not going to overlook anybody, I am not going to walk in there like I own them. I am still going to take everybody seriously.”

Bloomer hopes to improve on his fourth-place finish last year.

“My goal last year was to place and I got that, and I think this year, I am going to try to win it this year, I think I have a good shot at it,” Bloomer said.

Young said the different

approaches of Stone and Gauge reflect their personalities.

“It’s kind of how they are away from wrestling too, it’s just kind of how they act,” Young said. “Gavin is very X-Y-Z and is driven. Gauge is driven too but he is more relaxed about it and tries to make it more fun.”

Sophomore River Clark joins Bloomer and Stone as Baker wrestlers with state tournament experience. Clark finished with a 1-2 record at the 2020 tournament.

Nine other Bulldogs are making their debut this weekend at the highest level of competition.

Junior Jaden Martin, who narrowly missed qualifying for state in 2020, secured his spot this year by winning the heavyweight division at the regional tournament.

“I was really excited,” Martin said. “I was so glad I was able to win that tournament. That last match was a little bit scary. It’s definitely a lot better than losing.”

Young has been immensely proud of his junior heavyweight.

“He was right there last year, but then this year he has taken a giant leap,” Young said. “He listens, and he is an athlete. Big guys just cannot move like Jaden Martin does.”

In just his second year of wrestling, Martin said that although he knows the state tournament atmosphere can be intimidating, he is confident he’s prepared.

“I’ve been prepping to go to state for this last year, I’m ready for it, I know I will stay focused,” Martin said.

Young said all Baker wrestlers have worked hard during a year that has been anything but normal.

Instead of finishing the season at the end of winter, the Bulldogs are competing for trophies at the start of summer.

“They want it really bad,” Young said. “We didn’t get to really have an actual tournament this year (this weekend’s event is not sponsored by the Oregon School Activities Association) so they are excited to have that opportunity to see where they measure up to everybody else.”

With nine wrestlers making their first trip to state, Young said he has strived to keep them focused and to not be sidetracked by the pressure.

“We try to talk to them to just go out there to try and score as many points as you can and don’t worry about the score or anything else,” Young said. “If they are doing that then they will get better with the process,

because they are taking more chances.”

Regardless of the results this weekend, Young is confident that Baker’s wrestling team will come back even stronger when the next season starts — ideally on the normal winter schedule.

“I think the biggest thing is that exposure, getting those kids to the big show being so young as freshman or a sophomore,” Young said. “Taking that experience into next year and not being quite as nervous.”

Veteran state competitors such as Stone and Bloomer, who will be seniors, are excited about taking on the leadership roles that their former teammates, such as 2020 graduates Hon Rushton and Jake Eskew, excelled in.

Rushton won a state title at 182 pounds last year, and Eskew placed third at 145 pounds.

“I’m enjoying the new kids, and I enjoy watching them wrestle, and watching them improve,” Stone said.

“This is new for me,” Bloomer said. “I’ve never really been the leader of the wrestling room, I’ve always had Hon or Jake here being the leader, it’s different so I am getting used to it. It’s fun, I like it.”

Tournament results are available online at www.trackwrestling.com.



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