

Chavez aiming for spot atop state podium

By **JEFF CASPERSEN, Jr.**

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A rare blend of size and quickness is the driving force behind Jacob Chavez's rapid ascent to eminence in the sport of wrestling.

Just days away from beginning his quest for a state heavyweight title, the second-year Ukiah High varsity wrestler hopes for nothing less than a spot atop the podium when all is said is done.

"I want to win it," Chavez revealed. "This time around, I know the moves. I feel confident about wrestling. I think I'm going to do pretty good this year."

Chavez, in just his second year of varsity-level wrestling, amassed a 37-1 record during the regular season and is ranked No. 1 in the North Coast Section and No. 6 statewide as prep wrestling's second season begins.

"A lot of people don't realize that this is just Jacob's second year of high school wrestling," said Ukiah assistant wrestling coach Brett Colombini. "He came to us at 335 pounds and now he's down to 260. He was a state qualifier in his first year wrestling (varsity).

"He's just a natural athlete. He has great footwork; he's quick and powerful. He has good mat awareness and he picks things up quickly. You show him something and he goes out and executes."

Last year, Chavez fell just shy of placing at state, racking up a 2-2 record against California's top heavyweights. At NCS, the Ukiah senior took home a bronze medal, losing only to De La Salle's Eric Sandie ... by a single point.

With polished skills and a refined knowledge of the sport, Chavez has every reason to aim high as wrestling's postseason begins Saturday — with the North Bay League championships at Santa Rosa High School.

"I used to come out brawling. I just attacked," he said. "I had no technique at all. This year, I've learned technique; I execute. I do a lot more on my feet. I'm just patient, waiting for moves to come to me."

On first sight, Ukiah wrestling coach Adam Aikman knew he had stumbled upon a state-caliber grappler.

"I remember I drove him from freshman football practice one day and I told him if he stuck with it (wrestling), he could be a state qualifier. He's worked hard to come as far as he has," the sixth-year coach recalled.

Though, for a variety of reasons, Chavez would not hit the mat competitively until his junior year, he still spent time working out with the team during his freshman and sophomore. He also had junior high wrestling experience.

Chavez credits former teammate — both in wrestling and football — Jerome Zachariah with inspiring to get serious about wrestling.

“He’s the guy who taught me everything I knew. He came back in the summer and helped me out,” Chavez said.

For all his talent on the mat, wrestling isn’t even Chavez’s favorite sport. He feels much more at home on the football field.

“I kind of just like going out there and hitting people. It’s kind of primitive, but a whole lot of fun,” said Chavez, whose forte was stuffing the run as one of the NBL’s premiere defensive — and offensive — linemen.

Chavez’s most memorable personal sports moment came on the gridiron.

“Last year against Montgomery, I kind of ran 30 yards downfield and ran down their running back,” he reminisced. “That was a big boost for our defense.”

The senior’s post-high school fate remains murky. Much depends on his performance at the California Interscholastic Federation state wrestling meet, should he make it there. Though Chavez indicated he’d rather play football in college, he plans on making a decision once his options are clearer.

“I’ll do whatever I seem to want to do at the point in time, whichever I can excel at better,” he said.

However his scholastic future pans out, Chavez knows what he’d like to do when his playing days are done.

“I want to be involved in sports when I grow up,” he stressed. “I want to become a coach. I’ll go to college and maybe major in physical education and then come back and try to coach somewhere. I’d like to start off in high school and maybe teach at a college level. I have the instincts of what to do, what plays to choose.”

First things first. For now, Chavez is consumed strictly by his run at the state tournament. That is no paltry task, something the senior fully realizes.

“At league, some guys have competition, but we can usually pin them,” he noted. “At state, though, most of the matches are determined by one or two points and that’s it.”

The defending NBL champ begins his bid for state supremacy tomorrow at Santa Rosa High School, where North Bay League tournament action begins at 9 a.m.