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ASHEBORO - How do you follow up perfection?

Chris Waddell and the Uwharrie Charter Academy varsity wrestling team have that challenge this year. After finishing the 2018-19 season with a perfect 41-0 dual meet record to win the NCHSAA state 1-A dual meet title and then winning the team championship at the state 1-A meet the following week, matching those accomplishments for most would be impossible. It won't be easy, but the Eagles are going to give that a shot.



Chris Waddell, head wrestling coach at Uwharrie Charter Academy. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown/PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

the way through and some of the guys have the capabilities of being spectacular."

The Eagles return two state placers in Jerry Jimenez, who placed third last year at 152 pounds and junior Heaven Fitch, who became the first female to ever place at the NCHSAA state meet when she finished fourth at 106 pounds. In all, the Eagles return nearly 20 wrestlers from last year's team, six who wrestled at the state championship meet.

"Whenever people ask me about this year and ask if we are going to be as good this year - last year was a very special year," Waddell said. "I would like to think we can just reload, but last season was a season you just can't reload from. But these guys want to repeat. They have put a healthy amount of pressure on themselves to try and repeat. I told them last season doesn't matter any more. What we had done in the past is irrelevant to this season."

This year's team is already making a name for itself. The Eagles, who have never lost a home meet in the three-plus seasons Waddell has coached, opened the season with three wins, running their dual meet winning streak to 44 straight. UCA opened with victories over Carver (78-6), Parkland (83-0) and Lexington (70-12). UCA then won its own Wrestling for Hope Tournament this past weekend, finishing with 286 team points. West Stanly was second with 182. .

"We had a really good freshmen class last year and now they are sophomores," said Waddell, who graduated eight wrestlers from last year's team. "Last year, we were solid all the way through and spectacular at some spots. This year, we are solid all

"It's a big advantage mainly because they know what to expect," said Waddell. "A lot of times our practices are tougher than matches when they wrestle other teams. They know what our expectations are and what we want them to do,"

The team got off to a great start during the preseason when UCA captured a team title while wrestling at an event at the University of North Carolina. Led by captains Jimenez, Fitch, Sergio Salanda and Jamie Bernal, the Eagles are also getting key leadership from seniors Gage Beal and Holden Simmons.

"They have done an excellent job this offseason," said Waddell, who led Southwestern Randolph High School to a state runner-up finish in 2012. "They don't miss a workout and they have made some sacrifices. We have really good leadership once again. Last year's squad was a whole lot more vocal. These guys just do it. They haven't rested on their laurels at all."

The Eagles will have a very tough test this week as Southeast Guilford, one of the top 3-A programs in the state, comes to UCA Wednesday, along with Glenn and North Stanly.

"It was great last year and we celebrated," Waddell said. "Now that this season has started, they don't care about that."



Junior Heaven Fitch finished fourth in the state in her weight class as a sophomore. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown/PJ Ward-Brown Photography.