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ASHEBORO - In most instances, if a high school sports program is going to be successful, it must take on a family atmosphere. That's the thought of Uwharrie Charter Academy wrestling coach Chris Waddell, who has built one of the top wrestling programs in the state.



The Eagles, who are off to another fast start this season, have captured team titles as well as boasting numerous individual champions in years past and this year's team seems ready to add to UCA's illustrious history.

"Obviously, you try and be realistic," Waddell said as he prepared his team for a bevy of holiday action. "We have been fortunate in the past four or five years, maybe even more, to have been in it at the end. The whole key is getting together and doing things together. You have to have a family atmosphere. We do a lot of things together on and off the mat."

One thing the Eagles do on the mat is win. The Eagles advanced to the dual team championship last season, where it fell to Avery and then finished third overall at the individual state championships. Grayson Roberts (160 pound division) and Aldo Hernandez (132) return after capturing state championships and Brandon Jordan, who finished third at 113, Ethan Hines, who finished fourth at 106 and Jadon Maness, who finished fourth at 182, all return to the UCA lineup.

Senior Jake Morin was also a state qualifier at heavyweight.

"I feel we have a good opportunity with who we have coming back," Waddell said, who has three more state qualifiers from last year returning to this year's lineup. Jack McArthur, Jair Ulloa and Carson Robinson also gained valuable experience at the state tournament last year and are ready to make that next jump. "We have so many guys coming back from last year and some young guys who are really coming into their own."

With Roberts and Hernandez leading the way, the Eagles have a deep lineup. Among those ready to contribute are Christopher Whit, Aiden Allred, Aldo Hernandez, Lorenzo Alston, Corbin Grissom, Caden Bond, Devonte Harrison and Brennan Worrell.

One big advantage Waddell said wrestlers at UCA have over many of its competitors is the wrestling class offered as an elective. This class allows the younger wrestlers to experience

what it takes to be successful at the high school level long before stepping on the mat for the first time for the season.

"One of the biggest advantages we have is that wrestling class," Waddell said. "I have had one every year here I have been teaching. It's just like football or weight training. It does take time to get freshmen up to speed, otherwise they can't do anything older guys can do. I hate playing that game, trying to get freshmen caught up to run a regular practice."

In order to ready his team for conference play, the dual team tournament and the individual state championships, Waddell has his team facing some quality talent. The Eagles will be part of some very prestigious tournaments, including the Great Smoky Mountain Grapple, the Holy Angels Wrestling Tournament, which will be held in Greensboro this year, and the Pin Down Autism Tournament UCA hosts every season.

With a team that will only use three seniors this year, Waddell said he has plenty of talented juniors and underclassmen to keep the program in high regard. Freshman Lorenzo Alston, Waddell said, is special and has the opportunity to become a four-time state champion.

With the underclassmen on this year's team and a slew of talent at the middle school level, and the Eagles seem ready to soar for quite awhile.