

Danbury ranked No. 1 in The Bulletin's preseason wrestling poll

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Danbury High School wrestling coach Ricky Shook was home on Sunday.

"It's the last weekend I'm going to be home for about the next three months," Shook said with a laugh.

Welcome to the high school wrestling season.

It begins this week and the Hatters begin in a familiar spot: No. 1 in the state.

Danbury received all but one first-place vote in The Bulletin state wrestling coaches' preseason poll.

Newtown received the only other first-place vote, but is tied for sixth in the poll with Windham. New Milford, Fairfield-Warde, Foran and Trumbull round out the top five.

Ellis Tech became the first technical school to make an appearance in the state's top 10 last year for one week. This year, the Eagles begin there at No. 9.

Ledyard is No. 10.

"It's early and it's hard to tell," Shook said in reference to whether his team deserves the No. 1 ranking. "We have the toughest schedule ever, but everyone is back and we have three really good freshmen."

Just what everyone in the state needs, the strongest getting stronger.

The old wise tale is that when a male child is born in Ansonia, a football is placed in the crib.

In Danbury, the baby is wearing a wrestling singlet.

"I think I have known all these kids since they were babies. I've been waiting for 90 percent of them to get here. Danbury is a wrestling town," Shook said.

The numbers don't lie.

Danbury has won 29 of the last 30 Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference championships, 16 of the last 20 Class LL championships and 12 of the 16 State Open titles.

Shook served as an assistant coach at Danbury, prior to taking over the program in the 1999-2000 season and has since posted a 324-19 record.

But the Hatters have something to shoot for this season.

While they finished atop The Bulletin poll for a third time in four years, the Hatters did not win the State Open championship. New Fairfield, a Class M program, edged them out.

"That is always the argument, the better team versus who has more studs on the team," Shook said.

Last year, the coaches went with the team rather than the studs in the final poll.

Shook has tried to make it tough on his wrestlers this season.

Danbury will only participate in 17 or 18 dual meets, saving most of its time and energy for tournament competition, including the Beast of the East at the University of Delaware this weekend and the Eastern States Classic in January in New York.

"It's going to be interesting," Shook said. "Newtown (which has four or five of the top wrestlers in New England), New Milford, Xavier, Fairfield-Warde, Windham, Ledyard, they're all good."

Ellis Tech made headlines when it entered the poll on Jan. 19, but it was a brief stay. Coach Rafael Calixto wouldn't mind sticking around longer this time.

"It shows respect and recognition that we are a serious program that can compete at a high level," Calixto said. "I've always had the mentality that rankings are nice and it validates your work, but you have to show up and I like to be under the radar."

Ellis Tech will be challenged early.

The Eagles compete in the Lancer tournament this weekend. On Dec. 23, the Eagles travel to Middletown to take on host Xavier, Middletown and Ledyard, all of whom are mentioned in the preseason poll.

Ellis Tech heads to Florida on Dec. 27 to compete in a KSA tournament at Disney World in Orlando.

"It's a little reward. This group of seniors has earned it," Calixto said.