

Local wrestling teams hope to challenge mighty Danbury at State Open

Thursday

Posted Feb 23, 2017 at 6:22 PM

Updated Feb 23, 2017 at 6:30 PM

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Danbury is the monster waiting for everyone else at the State Open championship in New Haven this weekend.

Ranked No. 1 throughout the season in The Bulletin State Coaches' poll, the Hatters come in with 11 wrestlers in the Open field. That includes top seeds Jakob Camacho and Andrew Marquis and second-seed Michael Gaboardi.

Why should any team think they can compete?

"Why not?" is the response from Ellis Tech coach Rafael Calixto. "Why not us?"

The Eagles, the Class M state champion and first tech school team to win a state wrestling championship, will bring eight wrestlers to the Open.

And Calixto believes there are others — New Milford, Newtown, Xavier — who can figure into the mix.

"In theory, it will be hard to do. Danbury is a very talented team. They are strong and work hard. They've been there before. But, it's wrestling. Anything can happen," Calixto said.

Take last year for example.

The Hatters devoured the Class LL state championship by 66 points, getting three first-place finishes and three seconds.

But that wasn't the case in the State Open.

New Fairfield, a team that finished only third in Class M last year, blindsided everyone, including Danbury, and won the Open.

"You can ask any coach. They are there to win it. You don't train to finish second," Calixto said.

On Wednesday, the Eagles were training hard alongside Killingly to gain an edge for the weekend.

The only defending State Open champ from Eastern Connecticut, Ellis Tech's Baltazar "JoJo" Gonzalez, was bathed in sweat. The large, wet area on his back could have been confused as the size of the target that he will have on him at the Open.

"Big one," Gonzalez said through gasps. "To beat everybody at (132 pounds), it's going to be a battle. I got the target because of last year. I just have to work hard for the rest of the week and be ready to wrestle."

Gonzalez won at 126 pounds last year.

It will be tougher at 132.

His likely competitor in the Open final is the second seed, Montville's Joel Morth.

Morth wasn't happy after winning the Class S state championship and he is chasing something he has not won before. He finished second in the Open last year.

Like Gonzalez, his answer to success is to work harder.

"It's repetitions. I can get a lot of reps, stay after, do everything I need to," Morth said.

Jarod Kosman, the top seed at 106 this year, and Ledyard's Dan Contino also finished runner-up last year.

Contino has a tough road at 220 pounds. The Class S runner-up is seeded eighth and that means a quarterfinal matchup with Danbury's Marquis.

"I'm looking forward to it. I have to come back from this loss and see how I do," Contino said after his loss in the Class S final last week.

Ledyard will send nine wrestlers to the Open, tied for most in the area with Windham.

"Other than the last couple where we brought exceptional numbers, we're as happy as can be to put that many guys into the Open. I'm thrilled with it," Windham coach Pat Risley said.

Most have battled through conference championships two weeks ago — Ellis Tech is an exception to that rule — followed by another marathon last weekend, and now, the Open.

"It's the level of competition, too. Each match is a battle," Killingly coach Rich Bowen said. "It's not like you have a bye or a lower seed, you go into the fire right away. That's tough."

That's why Bowen and his seven Redmen were working out alongside the Eagles on Wednesday.

Sparring partners on Wednesday turn into opponents this weekend.

"Everyone has the same goals. Do as well as you can now, and with guys working together, it makes it a little easier I think," Bowen said.

Gonzalez said his goal is to see all eight Eagles qualify for the New England championship, which means finishing among the top five individuals in the weight class.

"We only had one guy advance last year — me. If we have seven or eight guys, it's a big jump for us and it shows that we did improve tremendously," Gonzalez said.

The realistic goal for Calixto?

"Top five," the Ellis Tech coach relented a bit. "If we can come in the top five, I think we've done a good job. Obviously, top 10 is something that would be satisfactory. It's nice that we won Class M — I know there were doubts about that. The Open is a whole different monster. The LL schools are really talented, but it doesn't mean a smaller school can't win it."

Why not Ellis Tech?