

## Danbury, Warde set to battle for FCIAC wrestling crown

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Fairfield Warde's Kris Gjinaj, left, and Danbury's Johnny Estevez grapple during wrestling action in Fairfield, Conn. on Wednesday Dec. 20, 2017.

The Fairfield Warde wrestling team consistently produces top-tier talent and is ranked among the top programs in the state and New England.

But most of the FCIAC finishes the Mustangs have accrued during its excellent ascent over the past decade have been as runner-up to an even greater foe.

Fresh off one of its most successful seasons in program history — and that's saying something — No. 1-ranked Danbury will square off against No. 3 Fairfield Warde at the 2018 FCIAC Championships, set to take place this weekend at New Canaan High. The

tournaments begins Friday with the finals at each weight class slated for 4 p.m. on Saturday.

"This is the start of the postseason and we've had a good season," said Mustangs coach Jason Shaughnessy. "Year in year out (Danbury) is a very strong team, the strongest in the FCIAC. We see them for the next multiple weeks with the Class LL and State Open. But our focus is not on that, it's what our kids can do to each reach their potential."

The defending New England-champion Hatters survived a recent scare from New Milford to finish the regular season undefeated against Connecticut competition. That meet marked the season debut for Jakob Camacho, a recent national championship winner who was nursing an injury.

The injury bug has bitten the Hatters at multiple points this season, but they are healthy now and ready to add another banner to the long list.

"They're very excited," said Danbury coach Ricky Shook. "It's what they all wrestle for; they all have big goals and FCIACs is the start of that."

Being able to fill out each weight class with a quality athlete is what separates the Hatters. That hasn't changed this year as a host of grapplers – some more experienced than others – are set to compete for gold medals.

Tyler Johnson, Ryan Jack, A.J. Kovacs and Kyle Fields are four of the many standouts that compose the Hatters army, a new-look roster after several seniors left the program last year.

"I'm actually looking forward to seeing how the younger guys do at this tournament, who haven't been there before," Shook said. "They went to this meet as little kids in sixth and seventh grade and they look forward to competing in it now. They finally get that chance and I want to see how they respond."

The Mustangs broke up Danbury's dominance for one season by winning the championship in 2010. Danbury has claimed 30 of the last 31 titles and toppled the Mustangs during a highly-competitive dual meet 51-22 in December.

Alex Steele (138), Noah Zuckerman (145), Izaake Zuckerman (170) and Joe Gjinaj (195) form a strong core for the Mustangs, who have finished second to the Hatters in five of the last six seasons. Warde posted an 18-1 record this winter.

"I think we performed very well," Shaughnessy said. "The goal right now is for each kid to perform to their potential. "We'd love to win FCIACs; realistically we'd like to be top two. There are other good teams in the league including Trumbull."

Eight different schools have claimed runner-up finishes since the Hatters began their remarkable stretch in 1987. Trumbull (7-1) and New Canaan (7-2) have posted strong league records this winter.

"It's a tournament our kids love to wrestle in," Shook said. "Obviously because we've been very successful, they enjoy it. They get to dye their hair this week as tradition."

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