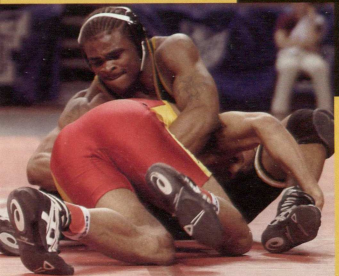
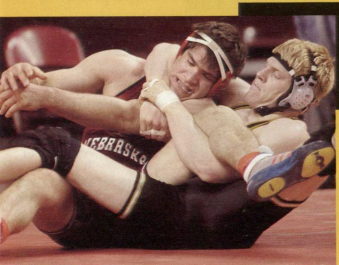


Grappling



**MU
WRESTLERS
TURN IN
THEIR BEST
YEAR EVER.**

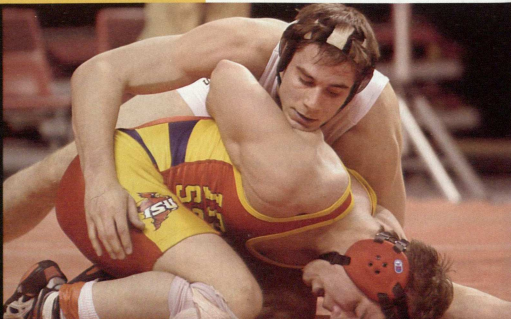


THIS YEAR'S MISSOURI WRESTLING team literally scaled the extra steps needed to achieve its highest-ever national ranking, No. 9. The team's slogan, "Reaching for New Heights," proved apt considering that all the wrestlers climb several flights of stairs daily to reach their practice facility on the fourth floor of the Hearnes Center. That directive comes from Coach Brian Smith, who insists that the elevators are there for "other" sports. "When I first instituted the rule, they thought it was silly," recalls Smith, who has finished four seasons at Missouri, "but now it is a pride thing." These days Smith has many reasons to feel proud. His team finished 18-3, tying the school record for most wins in a season, set in 1967.

A pivotal victory came on the road in mid-December when the Tigers upset Nebraska, which finished eighth at the NCAA Tournament in 2001. The upset gave MU its first conference victory since 1994, when it was still a member of the Big Eight.

Some Tigers felt disrespected when the Cornhuskers didn't come out to warm up until well after MU was on the mats. But MU showed it was ready in the first match when junior Kevin Herron, at the time

The talented trio of redshirt freshman Tyron Woodley, top, sophomore Scott Barker, middle, and senior John Kopnisky, right, led a resurgence in MU wrestling this season. All three advanced to the NCAA Championships along with sophomore J.P. Reese. Barker placed sixth, becoming MU's first All-American since 1998. Kopnisky, a three-time national qualifier, was the team's only senior and will stay in Columbia. He has been named wrestling coach at Rock Bridge High School.



with Success

STORY BY JENNIFER WILFORD, BJ '93

PHOTOS BY CHRIS LANDSBERGER

ranked No. 10 nationally as a heavy-weight, pinned Mitch Manstedt during the first period. "Kevin is only about 225, and he pinned their guy, a corn-fed boy of about 285 pounds," says sophomore J.P. Reese, an NCAA qualifier who competes at 141 pounds. "Then we just started winning like crazy."

The craziness reached a new level five days later when MU won the Reno (Nev.) Tournament, finishing ahead of perennial powerhouse Oklahoma State. The Cowboys defeated MU later in the season in a dual meet in Columbia, but at that competition the Tigers were tough and earned the attention of their 1,138 fans, the largest crowd ever to attend a dual meet at Missouri. "In previous years, it was so quiet. You could hear people coughing in the stands when we wrestled OSU," says sophomore Jeremy Spates. "A crowd like that was just unbelievable."

When Smith was hired in 1998, he was one of the few who believed the turnaround would happen. What he lacked in an established coaching record, he made up for with passion and ideals, including an intense work ethic both in the classroom and on the mat.

In his first season, Smith felt "like a dad," reprimanding wrestlers for missing class, being late for study hall or not working hard enough in practice. Eighteen wrestlers quit the team. Smith ended the year with just 11 athletes on a 10-man roster. By comparison, MU finished this season with about 30 wrestlers. "I was trying to raise the bar, and not everyone saw eye to eye with that," Smith says.

Smith believed that recruiting top in-state talent would be critical to his success. "I'd show Missouri kids a blank wall and tell them that we don't have a national champ [to honor] up there," Smith says. "I'd tell them that they could be gods of Missouri wrestling." This year, two of the four wrestlers who advanced to the NCAA Championships are Missourians: sophomore Scott Barker, who placed sixth and became MU's first All-American since 1998; and redshirt freshman Tyron Woodley. The others are Reese and John Kopnisky.

Smith now points enthusiastically to signs of support for his program. Some are hard to measure,

such as an increasing number of youngsters clamoring for autographs after matches. Others are easier to count. This summer, Smith expects between 500 to 600 kids at his wrestling camp, far exceeding the 250 he drew in his first year at MU. Attendance at his coaches' clinics, which started two years ago, has more than tripled, from 20 to 75 expected attendees.

Next season, MU will host the Big 12 Championships, and Smith would like to claim the conference title at home. He loses just one wrestler, Kopnisky, a three-time national qualifier, from this year's squad. Many will say it can't be done with so many powerful teams in the conference, but Smith has heard the naysayers before. He prefers to deal with challenges one step at a time. ❁

About the author: Jennifer (Kuester) Wilford, BJ '93, was a sports reporter for The Kansas City Star and the Columbia Daily Tribune. She is now assistant director for career services and undergraduate recruitment at the School of Journalism.

Heavyweight Kevin Herron will be one of three seniors in the starting lineup next year and will be counted on as a leader for the Tigers. He finished second on the team in total pins (10) and was ranked as high as ninth during the season.

