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Sports

Corning's Baker eyes Olympics

By DAVE DAVIES-Sports Writer

Chris Baker has passed the first test in his quest for a spot on the U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling team.

He placed first at 121 pounds (55 kg) wrestling for Vision Quest at the Washington State Wrestling Association Senior Freestyle State Championships March 13, earning the Washington state team spot for the USA Wrestling National Championships, choosing Greco-Roman.

This weekend, the 1995 Corning High grad takes the next step as he competes in the Northwest Regional Olympic Team Trial Qualifier in Battleground, Wash., Friday through today. The champion in each weight class qualifies for the 2004 U.S. Olympic Team Trials which run May 21-23 in Indianapolis.

If the 5-foot-3 Baker doesn't take first place at the regional qualifier, he can still place in the top eight at the USA Wrestling National Championships which start April 8 in Las Vegas for one of the 14 spots in the Olympic Team Trials in Indianapolis.

Baker's dream is to make the U.S. team for the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, in August.

"I've been working with him for over a year and a half now," said George Dunn, Baker's coach, "and he's improving every month. His dedication and hard work is something you don't see very often."

Baker's credentials include a fifth place at the AAU Ironman World Championships in Knoxville, Tenn., last May at 125 pounds, and a second place at 128 in the AAU National Championships last July in Norfolk, Va.

"I mainly do Greco because I've been an athlete in wrestling for 15 years, but my mom started me in judo at 6 years old," said Baker, 25. "So the reason I like Greco is I have 20 years of judo experience. Greco is more legs and hip tosses."

Dunn said Baker is looking tough going into the regional qualifier.

"I think he has a good chance," Dunn said. "He's training in a couple of areas. His running and lifting is very intensive. He wrestles five times a day. We work on tai chi for internal balance.

"His level is getting stronger. I took first place in Ironman Worlds and he's beating me 60 percent of the time. I'm the experienced Masters wrestler and he's gaining on me."

Baker started his career with judo and jujitsu, and at age 10 joined the Corning freestyle wrestling club under coach Jesse Orduno. He also played youth football, was on the Corning youth swim team and played Little League baseball.

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"Once I found out what wrestling was, everything else went by the wayside," Baker said.

He played varsity football, earning the Fighting Cardinal award his senior year, and wrestled for the Cardinals. He attended Shasta College for two years.

With the Northern Select freestyle wrestling team, he place fifth at 114.5 pounds at the 1996 California State Senior Open Freestyle Championships. He also took sixth at the 1996 Junior World Team Championships in Atlanta. At the 1999 state Senior Open championships, he placed first in Greco-Roman at 119 pounds and sixth in freestyle.

"After that I just put all my energy into college and the wrestling," Baker said.

Baker went north to get his bachelor of arts in religion and anthropology at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash. Last year, he got his master's in anthrotheology. He works full-time at Costco Wholesale's corporate office in Issaquah, Wash., and resides in North Bend, Wash.

This year will be Baker's fifth trip to the USA Wrestling National Championships. He was 14th at 119 in 1999 for Greco, then 12th in 2000, and 10th in 2001.

He wrestled for Pacific Lutheran as well, where he was an Academic All-American in 2002.

Team Baker, the group of people helping Baker strive toward his goal, includes Larry Gibson, a FILA gold level coach who coaches the Washington state team, and Vince Gregory, his fitness and nutrition trainer who guides Baker in stretching, strength training and mental preparation.

"I would say the pressure of making the Olympic team is the toughest part," Gregory said. "It's the old supply and demand thing. There are only a couple of spots out there and a lot of guys want those spots, so it's pretty fierce competition."

Gregory said Baker's preparation is very intense at the moment because he's going into his competition phase.

"He tries to stay about four pounds over his wrestling weight," Gregory said. "It's very much about strength-to-weight ratio. It's a performance sport, not like body building, so it takes a lot of discipline to go out and perform at a very, very high level."

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