

Unbeaten & Undaunted

Cael Sanderson takes his unprecedented wrestling legacy to the coaching realm

By Zachary Lawson, The NCAA News

Cael Sanderson was on the verge of NCAA history and amateur wrestling immortality in March 2002. For four years, the Iowa State University wrestler had turned away every opponent, and now he was entering the championship match just one step away from an unprecedented and unblemished career.

"I just wanted to get up there and wrestle," was all Sanderson could recall from his prematch routine. And wrestle he did. In the 197-pound title match, Sanderson defeated Jon Trence of Lehigh University to finish his picture perfect collegiate career with a record of 159-0. So impressive was the accomplishment that it was selected as one of the Top 25 Defining Moments in NCAA history.

With his victory at the 2002 Division I Wrestling Championships, Sanderson became the first undefeated wrestler in NCAA history.

Now, Sanderson plans to bring the success he enjoyed on the mat to the space beside it.

"When I was going through college and was loving what I was doing, that's when I decided I wanted to be an

NCAA coach," he said.

The four-time NCAA champion reached that goal earlier this year when he was named Iowa State's head coach after the retirement of Bobby Douglas, who coached Cael and brothers Cody and Cole during his Cyclone tenure.

People in the wrestling community

believe Cael will be as effective a mentor as he was a student. Mike Moyer, the executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA), said Sanderson's character will shine through in his new role just as it did while he competed for Iowa State.

"He will be every bit the role model as a coach as he was an athlete," Moyer says. "In addition to just being a phenomenal wrestler, he's every bit as phenomenal a person."

mother, Debbie, was never too far away, either. Having his older brothers at Iowa State while he wrestled went a long way in helping Sanderson achieve so much.

"I counted on that support," he said.

To round out the bunch, younger brother Cyler will become the fourth Sanderson to compete for Iowa State.

Being able to stay at Iowa State means plenty to Sanderson, who believes that the familiarity with the Cyclone wrestling community will help him in his first year as head coach.

"This is home," Sanderson said. "I've been a Cyclone for 10 years and it would have been tough to change that."

Though being a head coach is new ground for Sanderson, he prepped for the role by being an assistant and then the associate head coach in previous years. Sanderson said he feels right at home with the Iowa State family and fans. "There's not a better state for college wrestling than Iowa," he said.

Team First

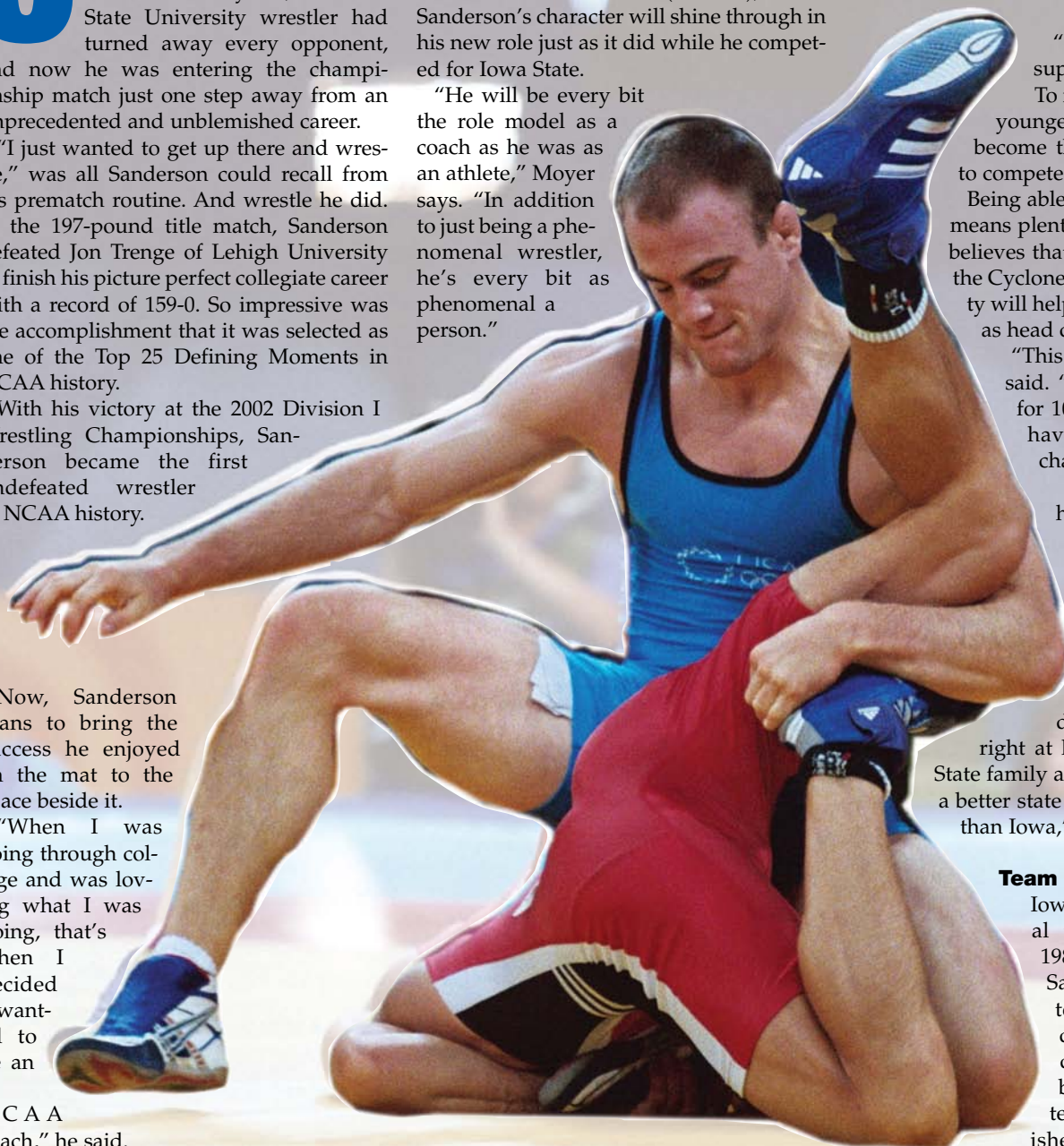
Iowa State's last national team title came in 1987, so the mission for Sanderson and his team is clear: chase down history. Sanderson already has been close; he and his teammates twice finished second at the national championships.

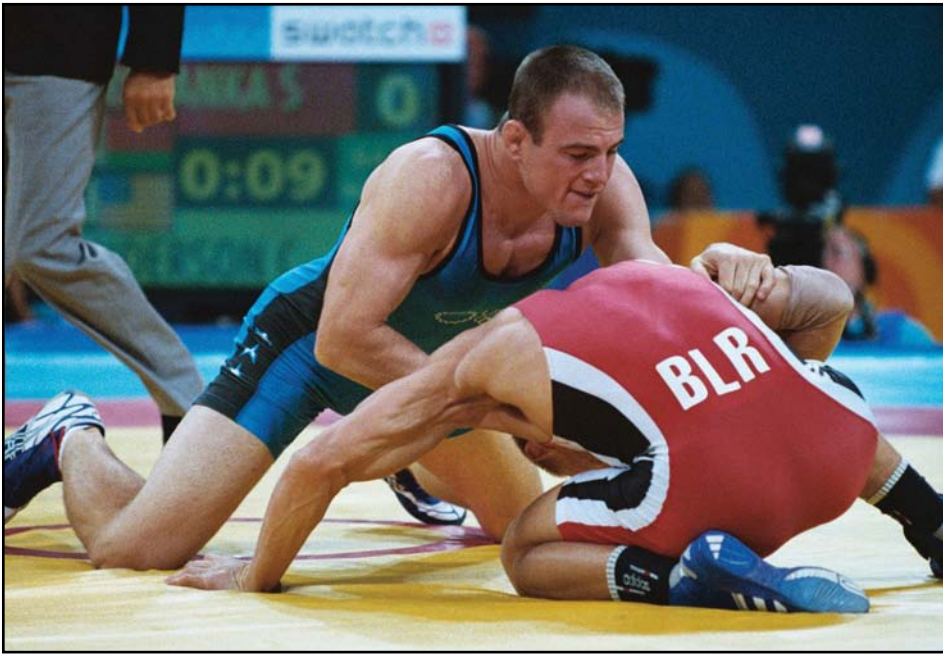
"My one hiccup, or regret, as an athlete is that we didn't win a team title when I was on the team. And that hurt; it really did," Sanderson said.

That one "regret" keeps Sanderson focused on a team concept. As a student-

Family Affair

Since being named head coach, Sanderson has added his older brothers to his coaching staff. Wrestling has been a big part of the close knit family. The boys' father, Steve, was their high school wrestling coach in Heber City, Utah. Their





Cael Sanderson completed an unbeaten college career by defeating Jon Trence of Lehigh University in the 197-pound match of the 2002 Division I Wrestling Championships. Sanderson became the head coach at Iowa State earlier this year.

athlete going through opponent after opponent, he was more concerned with the team standings. For him it was about scoring points for the team and making sure he did all he could to ensure team success.

"We're not looking for one four-time national champion," Sanderson said. "I want Iowa State to be the premier program in the country."

The NWCA's Moyer believes Sanderson represents not only the physical tenacity of the sport, but also its principles.

"He's a coach who I know will conduct his program in a way closely aligned with educational mission, vision and values. He is the definition of integrity, work ethic and sportsmanship, all things the NCAA stands for," Moyer said. "Cael is a great ambassador for our sport."

By focusing on the success of the team, Sanderson says he'll be able to get the most from his wrestlers. And his definition of maximum performance is not necessarily based on win-loss records, which is interesting coming from an undefeated champion.

He said it is not crucial to concentrate solely on winning, losing and national titles because if his wrestlers work hard and are dedicated, the desired results will come.

"The winning and losing will take care of itself," Sanderson said.

He said he looks forward most to getting his team ready to compete and preparing for life on and off the mat. Every wrestler

knows technique and is taught how to maneuver around the wrestling circle, but Sanderson wants to teach his team about effort as well.

Moyer cited Sanderson's effort in his willingness to participate in the NWCA All-Star Classic, which pits the top two wrestlers in each weight class.

"Nobody had more to lose than Cael Sanderson by competing in that event, and he never blinked when we invited him," Moyer said "He was ready to wrestle anywhere, anytime, under any circumstance."

Heroes and Champions

Sanderson is a competitor, regardless of whether he's on the mat or off. He said his fighting spirit and the need to give a complete effort in each match was a big reason for his success during his collegiate career.

"My mind-set will be the same as a coach," he said. "Regardless of whether you're coaching practice, in a national championship final or in your first match of the season, the mindset has to be the same."

It was that steady mind-set that prepared Sanderson for his journey toward a spot in NCAA lore. Entering college, he said he thought about winning every match like everyone else and figured that he could work toward being the best wrestler he could be.

"My freshman year, I just wanted to make guys never want to wrestle me again. I thought by the end of the season, I'd be ready to win a national championship," Sanderson said.

It was not until the end of his freshman

Cael Sanderson continued his success with a gold medal at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.

season that Sanderson began to seriously think about staying undefeated for the remainder of his career, but he knew it was a long haul. But he said the only real pressure he felt was from himself – and he knew he could handle *that* kind of pressure.

"There was pressure, but it was something that I liked," Sanderson said. "I loved what I was doing and loved competing. The bigger the match, the better I would compete."

So after the biggest match and completing a 159-0 collegiate record, what was he thinking?

"I had spent four years thinking about it and hearing about it, and everybody wanted to bring that stuff up, so it was a real big sense of relief," Sanderson said about his final collegiate match.

He said he owes a lot to the sport that taught him about hard work and discipline. Sanderson hopes his accomplishments have given wrestling the publicity and notoriety it deserves.

"Our sport needs heroes and champions," said Moyer. "Cael has really become a role model that many aspiring young wrestlers, boys and girls, are striving to emulate."

Sanderson continued his success with a gold medal at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, a feat he said compares with – but does not rank ahead of – his undefeated collegiate career. "There's something unique about completing an undefeated career. That is special," he said.

So is Sanderson.

