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Nittany Lion Aaron Brooks Wins 2024 Hodge Trophy as Nation's Top Collegiate Wrestler **Brooks wins Penn State's seventh Hodge Trophy**

Courtesy Tristan Warner, WIN Magazine -- UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa.; April 1, 2024 -- Penn State senior Aaron Brooks was named the 2024 Hodge Trophy as the nation's best collegiate wrestler. The award honors the top college wrestler every year. It was established in 1995 and is wrestling's equivalent to college football's Heisman Trophy. Brooks won the 2024 NCAA title at 197 with a perfect 22-0 record. He had six pins, 11 technical falls and three majors.

Brooks, a five-time All-American, was one of two Penn State wrestlers to become four-time NCAA Champions at the NCAA tournament on March 21-23 (joined by teammate Carter Starocci). He ends his career at Penn State with an 89-3 career record. Brooks becomes the fifth Penn State Nittany Lion to win the school's seventh award. Kerry McCoy (1997), David Taylor (2012, 2014), Zain Retherford (2017, 2018) and Bo Nickal (2019) have also been honored. Penn State, with seven total trophies, is the only school in the nation with more than four.

Via WIN Magazine: – Paralleling his coach, Cael Sanderson, Penn State's Aaron Brooks won three NCAA titles at 184 pounds before deciding to move up to the 197-pound weight class in pursuit of his fourth collegiate crown this season.

Partly because his body was growing and the weight cut to 184 was becoming more difficult, but Brooks also asserted that he wanted to make his final season more fun by challenging himself to face new opponents at a higher weight class.

It is that type of mentality, the desire to seek new challenges and never become complacent, that propelled Brooks to a dominating senior season that saw the North Hagerstown, Md. native post a 22-0 record with three major decisions, 11 technical falls and six falls en route to becoming just the seventh-ever four-time NCAA Division I wrestling champion.

With that final stat sheet, Brooks has officially been named the recipient of the 2024 WIN Magazine/Culture House Dan Hodge Trophy awarded to the nation's top college wrestler.

Brooks will be presented the Hodge Trophy at the Penn State University wrestling banquet on Sunday, April 7 in State College. Like in past seasons, Brooks will then publicly be presented the Hodge at a football game this fall. For more information on the Dan Hodge Trophy, including a list of all past winners along with the release story and stats from the year they won the Hodge, visit www.WIN-magazine.com.

The seventh Nittany Lion to win the Hodge, Brooks comfortably won the vote as he acquired 48 out of 59 first-place votes. The Hodge Trophy Voting Committee is comprised of: a retired college coach from each region of the country, a representative from each of the

national wrestling organizations, select national media members and past Hodge winners. Second-place Parker Keckeisen (Northern Iowa, 184 pounds) received eight first-place votes, Carter Starocci (Penn State, 174) got two votes and Greg Kerkvliet (Penn State, HWT) received one vote.

Brooks accumulated the highest portion of the fan votes as well, which accounted for the final five of first-place votes. The four-time NCAA champion received 13,416 votes out of the total 26,928 fan votes that were cast online March 26-29. Keckeisen finished second in the fan vote with 9,675, while Starocci finished third with 1,868.

"Winning the Hodge Trophy is a blessing," Brooks commented. "It is like the Heisman Trophy in football, so to know the hard work and dedication I've put in is being rewarded with such a historic award is really cool."

"I am really happy for Aaron," Sanderson added. "He worked hard, kept improving in all of his positions and had a dominating season."

Founded in 1995 by Mike Chapman, the creator of WIN Magazine, and sponsored by ASICS, the Dan Hodge Trophy is awarded to the most dominant wrestler each year by WIN and Chapman's company Culture House. The late Dan Hodge was an undefeated three-time NCAA champion at 177 pounds for the University of Oklahoma, and the only wrestler to ever appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated (April 1, 1957).

"Aaron Brooks stands tall in the long list of Dan Hodge Trophy winners, not only for his performance on the mat this year (and all four years, for that matter) but for the way he has represented his school and his sport. Penn State has set the standard for team excellence over the past dozen years and also for individual excellence. It's a pleasure to welcome Aaron to the roll call of Dan Hodge Trophy recipients," said Chapman.

While Brooks was ecstatic to receive the award, he mentioned his dominant performance on the mat this season was more of a by-product of Penn State's team culture and philosophy than any specific vision quest for the Hodge.

"When you put expectations on yourself, that creates pressure," Brooks explained. "If it comes, it comes. I don't put it on my mind like that. My faith is what took me to this level. You chase a lot of things when you're young, and that creates a lot of pressure. It is about seeking things of the kingdom instead of chasing worldly things."

Sanderson, the architect behind Penn State's decade-plus stronghold on the collegiate wrestling landscape, echoed Brooks' thoughts.

"I never heard Aaron talk about winning the Hodge, but one of his many strengths is his faith and knowing he is going to go out and give a tremendous effort and everything else will work itself out."

The three-time Hodge winner Sanderson expounded on the mindset that Brooks, among many other Nittany Lions, have harnessed.

"Winning and losing is a lower standard than performance. You could win and not wrestle your best. Performance is a permanent mentality. It is hard for kids because there can be so much pressure and emphasis on results. Aaron has a higher vision on why he competes."

Criteria for the Hodge includes a wrestler's record, dominance/bonus-point percentage, quality of competition and sportsmanship.

Brooks was one of four NCAA champions who finished the season undefeated. He finished with the highest bonus-point percentage (90.91 percent), slightly ahead of Keckeisen (89.29 percent).

Brooks' three wins against the other seven All-Americans in the 197-pound bracket all came at the NCAA tournament, as he pinned eventual third-place finisher Stephen Buchanan (Oklahoma) in the quarterfinals, tech-falled sixth-placer Rocky Elam (Missouri) in the semis and defeated runner-up Trent Hiday (NC State), 6-1, in the finals.

The Nittany Lion credited his teammates and coaches for the uptick in scoring and dominance throughout his final campaign in blue and white.

"Wrestling more in the offseason at the US Open and Final X helped me to know what to improve on," Brooks mentioned. "But, training all summer with bigger guys like Kyle Snyder and Greg Kerkvliet made me so much stronger."

"Iron sharpens iron in combat sports," he continued. "At Penn State, it is a brotherhood. I always tell the younger guys you're training in the best room in the world. You've seen every look you could possibly get, so just go out and let it fly."

While Sanderson acknowledged Brooks' natural instincts for the sport, he maintains that perhaps his maturity and leadership has separated him from the rest of the best.

“Aaron has a great mind for wrestling,” the Nittany Lion head coach stated. “He loves wrestling. He feels it. He knows the technique, but that is only one aspect. He shares his passion. He is very calm when he competes. He has that bigger-picture mentality. The bigger the match, the better he is. He has the ability to share that with his teammates, which is powerful.”

For Brooks, the mentality to not just win but to dominate began with a bevy of memorable youth coaches, all of whom Brooks claimed he took something from and applied it to his career in some way.

“Every time you have someone important in your life, you take something from them. One of the most important things I was ever taught was by coach Chris Bentley, who told me to never feel sorry for myself, and 10 years later it clicked. God put the right people in my life for a reason.”

“My whole life, my coaches would always tell me to cut them and get one more takedown or go get the major. You have to be willing to take a risk and not be comfortable settling. Be at peace, but never be settled or stagnant.”

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