

*d3wrestle.com Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Preview – by Andy Vogel*

Wartburg is the clear favorite once again as the Knights attempt to make it 16 IAC team championships in a row as the host team this Thursday. With a 22-0 dual meet record and eight wrestlers in the latest d3wrestle.com rankings, they are poised to do just that. Aaron Wernimont, Romeo Djoumessi, and TJ Miller all will be defending their titles from 2007 with Jake Helvey hoping to improve on his 2007 runner up finish.

Along with the trio of Wartburg defending champs, Jestin Hulegaard of Buena Vista is the only other returning champion this season, though runners-up Chris Heilman and Pat McCauley of Cornell, Alec Bonander and John Miller of Luther, and Jay Figgins of Loras are all hoping to make the jump one step higher on the podium and take home a conference championship.

In the team race, it looks very much like a race for 2<sup>nd</sup> place, as this does not appear to be the year to break the Wartburg stranglehold on the team title. However, an interesting battle should shape up for the 2<sup>nd</sup> place trophy between any of the next three teams. #8 Coe, #10 Buena Vista, and #12 Luther have played round robin this year, with Coe defeating Buena Vista, Buena Vista defeating Luther, and Luther defeating Coe. It will come down to whoever has the best performance from their top wrestlers, as a dual meet is different than a tournament. With four of the ten #1 ranked wrestlers in the tournament, wrestlers will have to bring their A game in order to secure one of the 32 slots at the NCAA tournament.

**125 lbs.**

The Favorite: Chris Heilman, Cornell College

Top Challenger: Clayton Rush, Coe College

Other Contenders: Robert Struthers, Wartburg; Mike Miille, Buena Vista

Rush holds the top spot in the current d3wrestle.com rankings, but he has since lost to Heilman, giving Heilman a 2-1 edge against the Coe freshman this year. Heilman was in a battle with 2007 NCAA champ Hansen at last year's championships before losing on a defensive fall. Rush has had an outstanding first season in college, reeling off a 31-3 record after an outstanding career at Aledo (IL) High School. Struthers has split with Rush this season with both matches coming in December at the Dick Walker Invitational. Each of the three (Heilman, Rush, Struthers) are in the top five in the rankings. Miille could be a spoiler here, but he could also be on the outside looking in.

**133 lbs.**

The Favorite: Jake Helvey, Wartburg

Top Challenger: Nick Nothorn, Cornell

Other Contenders: Jestin Hulegaard, Buena Vista; Gannon Hjerleid, Coe; Zach Bartlett, Luther; Jordan Loy, Loras

Helvey finished 5<sup>th</sup> in the NCAA last year and is ranked #2 in the nation behind Augsburg's Travis Lang. He was 2<sup>nd</sup> at the conference tournament to Hulegaard last season, and this is a weight class with a lot of national talent concentrated in one bracket as Helvey, Nothorn, and Hulegaard are ranked with Hjerleid, Bartlett, and Loy in the next tier down. Helvey looks like the man here, but Nothorn, Hulegaard, and Hjerleid each have the talent and experience to pull the upset.

**141 lbs.**

The Favorite: Matt Kelly, Wartburg

Top Challengers: Travis Grawin, Luther; Luke Satern, Buena Vista

Other Contender: Niles Mercer, Coe

Kelly is a recent addition to the Wartburg lineup, as most of the starts this year have gone to Zac McKray, a 2007 NCAA qualifier. McKray was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the latest d3wrestle.com rankings, but the NWCA's more recent rankings have Kelly ranked in that spot after his 7-0 blanking of Satern and 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish in the North Country Invitational. McKray could still have this spot, but for now it is in the hands of Kelly. Either Knight would be favored to win the tournament this Thursday. After Kelly's win over Satern, it looks like a step down from Kelly to the next group of Satern and Grawin, also a national qualifier. Mercer is a step down from those two as both have convincing wins over him.

**149 lbs.**

The Favorite: Jacob Naig, Wartburg

Top Challenger: Aaron Cook, Buena Vista

Other Contenders: Ryan Mulnix, Cornell; Tyler Baker, Coe; Curtis Barber, Simpson

The difference between Naig and the field appears to be significant based on this season's results. Naig has been on a tear all year and hopes to finish one step higher on the NCAA podium than he did at this weight in 2006 where he lost to Larsen of UW-Lax in the final. Cook has come on strong in the conference as of late, while Mulnix, Baker, and Barber all have the ability to win big matches. Whoever of Quist and Pyle makes the start at 149 for Luther could look to play the spoiler here.

**157 lbs.**

The Favorite: Aaron Wernimont, Wartburg

Top Challengers: Pat McCauley, Cornell; Josh Terrell, Dubuque; Joey Verschoor, Buena Vista; Erik

Hanson, Loras

Wernimont has been the clear favorite at this weight all year long and has hovered near the top spot in the rankings for the whole season. With a 33-1 record, he's earned it. Below him, however, is a tempest of wrestling talent, as all four of the challengers have been in and out of the national rankings. Terrell has come on hard as of late with a major decision win over Baker while Hanson, Verschoor, and McCauley are 6,7,8 in the latest d3wrestle.com top ten. McCauley and Wernimont are both returning All-Americans.

**165 lbs.**

The Favorite: Tyler Burkle, Coe

Top Challenger: Justin Hanson, Wartburg

Other Contenders: Darren Kaisand, Dubuque; Julian Mancha, Buena Vista

The undefeated Burkle is the best of a down weight class for the IIAC, with Burkle alone in the national rankings, but do not make the mistake of believing there is not talent here. Hanson appears to have supplanted Adam Weber for Wartburg, but as with 141, that could change between now and Thursday. Either way, the difference between Hanson and the other contenders is less than the difference between Hanson and Burkle. Weber did recently blank Mancha 10-0, but that result means little if he does not get the nod over Hanson.

**174 lbs.**

The Favorite: Josh Murray, Buena Vista

Top Challengers: Kyle Kehrli, Cornell; Tyler Jentz, Coe

Other Contenders: Craig Kreman, Wartburg; Evan Brown, Dubuque

Any of the top three could get hot and win this weight class, and even Kreman could have a good tournament and walk away with a win, however, this is the weight class most likely to result in Wartburg having 9 qualifiers instead of their usual 10. Murray is the hot hand with recent big wins, and Jentz just topped Kehrli two weeks ago. None of the top contenders here were national qualifiers a year ago.

**184 lbs.**

The Favorite: Romeo Djoumessi, Wartburg

Top Challengers: Jay Figgins, Loras; Greg Lalla, Coe

Other Contenders: Matt Wonderlin, Luther; Nic Barclay, Luther

These five should be able to hold off the field for the top spots in the conference, and the undefeated Djoumessi should be able to find his way to the top of the podium again. A tremendous athlete, he has handled all comers and looks to finish on top this year after a fourth place NCAA finish a year ago. Figgins was also an All-American last season, and Lalla has put together a solid season capped by a close 12-10 loss to Djoumessi, proving that perhaps he can be beat in the conference. He just missed the NCAA tournament last year with a fourth place IIAC finish.

**197 lbs.**

The Favorite: TJ Miller, Wartburg

Top Challenger: Alec Bonander, Luther

Other Contenders: Rob Kramer, Coe; Brian Stueve, Buena Vista

TJ Miller was the national champ last year, though Bonander came back to place third, ripping his way through the consolation round. Miller took an early loss to Bollig of Stevens-Point, but came back to top Bonander in a hotly contested, four overtime match that earned Miller d3wrestle.com Wrestler of the Week Honors. The other contenders do not match up to the level of the top two here, but at least one of them will punch a ticket to Cedar Rapids with a good performance this week.

**285 lbs.**

The Favorite: Brian Borchers, Wartburg

Top Challenger: John Miller, Luther

Other Contender: Jeremy Klein, Loras

Brian Borchers watched as Blake Gillis made the finals every year, finally winning the title in 2007. He has made the most of his turn this season, propelling himself to the #3 spot in the rankings and the top spot in the IIAC. Miller underachieved last season, failing to place from the #4 seed at the NCAA tournament after an All-America turn in 2006. Miller is not built like your typical heavyweight, whereas Borchers is more traditional. Both are talented wrestlers and should make for an interesting final. Both have a chance to do very well in Cedar Rapids this March.