

MONSTER OF THE MAT

Young grappler pins his success on his coaches knowledge and his fitness

By Thad Mumau
Correspondent

Dennis Gustafson's biggest wrestling thrill was defeating Jake DeAngelo, the defending AAU North Carolina Junior champion, in the 75-pound class.

"When I beat him for the spot on the North Carolina National team, he was the favorite," explained the 11-year-old son of Dennis and April Gustafson of Raeford. "Jake is well-known."

Gustafson is becoming pretty well known himself. Entering this past weekend, he owned a 32-1 record which included seven first-place tournament finishes and three victories over DeAngelo in as many tries.

Gustafson, who has been wrestling three years, is in his first season with the Rhino Wrestling Club.

"Dennis has improved so much," said club coach Marty Bartram. "His two biggest assets are his strength and athleticism. He has good potential, but at first he was content to overpower people. Now his technique is catching up to those areas."

"He is a sponge, just soaking up everything we tell him. The last six weeks, he has been more concerned with doing it the right way and getting better than just winning."

Polishing his technique has not gotten in the way of winning for Gustafson. He opened

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the season in November by taking all three of his matches at the Wake Forest Challenge. He placed second in the Cougars Den event, then won the Junior and Schoolboy titles by sweeping nine matches at the Eastern N.C. Wrestling Club tournament on Dec. 16.

He again won Junior and Schoolboy championships at the Dec. 23 Strength of Heart Christmas Challenge. The next week, he swept six matches to win the Denver Dragons Challenge.

On Dec. 10, he went 4-0 in Mebane to earn the Junior 75 spot on the North Carolina team that will wrestle in the Middle School AAU National Challenge Duel on Feb. 9-12 in New Jersey.

"My dad has taught me a lot," Gustafson said, "and Coach Bartram is a real good coach. I joined the Rhinos because I was looking for strong competition and the chance to get better. I have improved with my technical stuff, and I'm more fit since I came to this team."

The elder Gustafson, who is an assistant coach with the Rhinos and has a wrestling

background himself, has been impressed with Bartram and his program.

"What it has done for Dennis is incredible," he said. "The coaching (from Bartram) is real strong. It has helped my son improve his technique and his conditioning."

The Rhinos practice three nights a week, for two hours each session, and compete in a tournament every Saturday from the middle of November until March 31, when the season concludes with the Southern Championships at the Charlie Rose Agri-Expo Center.

"On the other days, my dad, my brother (8-year-old Dustin) and I work out at home," said the East Hoke Middle School sixth-grader. "We have a mat in the garage where we work on moves. We sprint a mile and do 200 push-ups and 200 sit-ups every day that I'm not practicing or wrestling in a tournament."

"I never get tired of it. I just love wrestling. It's different than other sports because it is more physical."

While Gustafson is enjoying great success now, his future is even brighter, according to his coach.

"We love to win," Bartram said, "but what the Rhinos stress is preparing for high school wrestling. We preach that championships now might be nice, but winning in high school is the big thing."

"Dennis' maturity is big. He realizes that he is working for the future. He has a lot going for him, with his dad's knowledge and teammates who help make him better at practice. He has the desire and the work ethic to go a long way in this sport."

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