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Ouachita wrestlers rank 4th nationally in NCAA tourney; Ward named D-II Coach of the Year



By Kyle Parris, OBU Sports Information Director

March 17, 2014

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ARKADELPHIA, Ark. -- In just its fourth year of competition, the Ouachita Baptist University Tigers wrestling program sent five qualifiers to the NCAA Division II Championships in Cleveland, Ohio, and finished fourth in the nation. All five Tigers earned All-America honors during the tournament and Head Coach Kevin Ward was named the NCAA D-II Coach of the Year.

Five wrestlers qualifying for the national tournament and earning All-America honors are program records for Ouachita. The Tigers now have 10 All-America wrestlers in program history, including two national runners-up. Their performance in Cleveland caps a series of program firsts this season, including the team's winning regular-season dual record.

"I am so proud of Coach Ward and our wrestling team," said Ouachita President Rex Horne. "Just to think that we started from nothing a few years ago and now celebrate our team finishing fourth in the nation with five All-Americans and our coach winning Coach of the Year in Division II.

"This coach and his team bring respect to Ouachita as great wrestlers, but also as fine young men and student-athletes," he added.

After guiding the Tigers to an 8-5 regular-season dual record and keeping the preseason eighth-ranked Tigers in the top 20 all season, Coach Ward was named the NCAA D-II Coach of the Year.

Ward, the founding coach of Ouachita's wrestling program, is a graduate of Oklahoma State University. A four-year starter on OSU's NCAA Championship wrestling teams, he was a two-time NCAA qualifier and 2005 Big 12 champion. He also was named a three-time Academic All-American by the National Wrestling Coaches Association.

Ward pointed to his wrestlers and staff at Ouachita as primary reasons for the program's outstanding success. "We never based our plans for this program on finishes," he said. "We based it on people and building our program with the right kinds of student-athletes and competitors."

Ward said he was honored by the recognition but credited the team's success to his entire staff, including first-year assistant coach Chris Chionuma. "Chris has been a positive all the way around for this team," Ward said. "His impact on the guys is a direct influence on our tournament results this year."

Ward emphasized that trophies and titles should not be what solely defines a program, but he acknowledged the tournament success was a huge step for a young program and a great reward for the hard work the team has put in this season.

Looking toward the future, he added, "I think we're right on schedule personnel wise, but I think we're way ahead of where other people thought our team would be success wise."

Ouachita Athletic Director David Sharp affirmed the program and its success.

"It's a great accomplishment for Coach Ward and the five student-athletes to receive these national accolades," Coach Sharp said. "To have five All-Americans and a Coach of the Year is something for the university to be proud of."

Overall, the Tigers finished the 2013-14 season with five wrestlers ranked nationally in the top eight of their respective weight classes.

Josh Myers, a 141-pound junior, finished as the national runner-up. He had a dominant tournament, winning his first three matches by a combined score of 27-5. No opponent was able to score more than three points against Myers in the tournament. He dropped a close 2-1 decision in the championship match against Daniel Ownbey of University of North Carolina-Pembroke.

Junior 184-pounder Dallas Smith, a 2012-13 national runner-up, finished third. Smith battled back from a quarterfinal loss by decision to win three straight matches, including back-to-back matches where he was down by five-point deficits. He defeated Nick Burghardt of Maryville (Mo.) University by fall in the consolation final.

Bobby Williams, a 157-pound senior, bounced back from an opening round decision, winning three of his last four matches by pin. Williams defeated Derrick Weller of Lindenwood (Mo.) University by fall at the 1:30 mark of the first period to finish seventh.

Nate Rodriguez, a 133-pound true freshman, shrugged off an opening round loss to score two falls and a major decision win in the consolation bracket. Rodriguez defeated Isaiah Hurtado of San Francisco State University with a first-period fall to finish seventh.

Garrett Evans, a 125-pound sophomore, dropped a decision in the quarterfinals, but fought his way back through the consolation bracket to finish eighth. Evans was ranked in the top eight of his weight class throughout the season.