



## **2008-09 Grand Canyon Wrestling Outlook**

Coach R.C. LaHaye wanted to make an impression this year, and he wanted his team to buy into it.

So he came up with a theme he's hoping will register with every wrestler wearing a purple and black singlet this year.

"Ready to Shine in '09."

Following a year when Grand Canyon University got its feet wet last season as a first-year program, the Antelopes plan to change the culture in a hurry. Last year, only four weight classes were eligible, meaning GCU had to forfeit all the other matches. That cost the Antelopes six points at each bout.

This year, GCU has a full squad, so now they're on a more even mat.

"That will definitely help," LaHaye said. "Just having a full team is going to be great. It's gonna be a lot better on everybody. In college wrestling, you have camaraderie. To have 10 other guys behind you when you come off the mat, knowing they need you, is important. Especially when you're wrestling on the road, you need your teammates' support."

Two returning starters are back in Jack Porter and Stephen Towne. Ten others return following a redshirt year in which they trained with the team in 2007-08. A couple wrestlers will be eligible in the second semester, which will fortify a complete lineup.

Towne, who had the most wins (18) on the team last year is expected to redshirt. That could open the door for Efrain Escudero and Daniel Rubio at 157. Escudero is also a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. He won the Utah Valley Open in non-varsity competition last year.

Jack Porter returns, but is expected to move down a weight class to 165. Last year he won 13 matches at 174, and set the school record for quickest pin in 25 seconds. "Down at 165, he could be very competitive," LaHaye said.

Alex Contreras may be the most technical wrestler on the squad. He looks to occupy the 125 spot. "He's going to be extremely tough at 125," LaHaye said. "There's no reason he can't make it to nationals."

At 133, freshmen Richard Palencia and Anthony Vidales will battle for the starting job. Freshmen Austen Moore and Tony Denegal will battle for the 141 spot. Bryan Scambler, who spent last year training with the 'Lopes, is expected to nail down the 149 spot. "He's very tough," LaHaye said. "We just need to get him some confidence."

Ryan Becerra will be eligible after Christmas, and will compete with Daniel Garay at 174. “Becerra is very talented,” LaHaye said. “We just got to get him to be more consistent.”

Adam Barnett trained all year last season and should be ready to go at 184 this year. “He’s very strong and in great shape,” LaHaye said. “That, alone, is going to give some guys fits.”

The 197 class is up for grabs with a trio of freshmen battling it out. Heavyweight Richard Hernandez will be eligible after Christmas. “He’s a full-size, 285-pound heavyweight,” LaHaye said.

GCU will host six home dual meets this year, which includes two NCAA Division I teams in Portland State and Arizona State. A pair of Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference teams, New Mexico Highlands and Mesa State, will also visit Antelope Gym. NAIA powers Embry Riddle and Cal Baptist also will wrestle at GCU.

“We’re not gonna be satisfied with just (having a full team),” LaHaye said. “We have some guys who can compete at this level. We’re gonna push ’em as hard as we can. There will be some freshmen and some transfers pushing these guys. No spot is a guarantee. It’s an interesting makeup because we’ll be split down the middle. Half of them are returners and half are new guys. They all seem to be meshing well.

“We need to get ’em experience so we can get some confidence. Most of them will be around for at least two years, some of them three. I’m excited to get these guys going to be competitive in the RMAC and then be competitive at nationals. There’s no reason when two years from now I still have these guys as juniors and seniors they can’t be a top 10, top 15 team in the nation.”