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South wrestling has come a long way in short time

By Tracy Renck

There's no questioning the historical success of Pueblo high school football, baseball and basketball teams over the years.

Yet, don't forget about wrestling.

The first city wrestling state crown wasn't captured until the 1992-93 season when the Bobby Gonzales-coached Central Wildcats team snared the Class 5A crown.

Four years later, South High School won the Class 4A state title in February of 1997.

Jerry Sisneros, South's veteran mat boss, admitted moments after his team's championship, that Gonzales helped inspire his squad. The day before the state tourney Gonzales brought the Wildcats' team trophy, state patches and rings to show the Colts.

"Bobby opened the kids' eyes," said Sisneros in *The Pueblo Chieftain* after his team won state. "He said things that I couldn't. He told kids when they lost, they had to fight back through the losers' bracket and score points for the team. The kids looked at the trophy and all that stuff and they were impressed.

"They knew they had a chance to make history for their school. Bobby and Central opened the door five years ago and we wanted to walk through the door ourselves. We finally did that."

The 1997 state champions will be honored for their historic accomplishment on Thursday at the South gym prior to the Colts' 7 p.m. dual match against Pueblo County.

Actually, that first wrestling state title proved to be a springboard for the Colts. Since then, South has reached the state summit twice more in back-to-back seasons in 2004 and '05.

That magical 1997 campaign, 10-plus years ago, is still fresh in Sisneros' mind.

"That state championship really put our program on the map," said Sisneros, who took over the South program in 1986. "It showed that we were one of the elite teams in the state. Plus, a lot of things we

did that season, we still use in our program today. That season was a blueprint for the success that we've had since then."

Under Sisneros, South also finished second in the state tournament in 1999 (Class 5A) and in 2006 (Class 4A).

Sisneros has guided 13 South wrestlers to 15 state titles. Matt Garcia (1998-99) and E.K. Waldhaus (1999-2000) won back-to-back state crowns.

In their first championship season, the upstart Colts took 11 wrestlers to state. The list consisted of Frank Sagona (119 pounds), Chris Solis (125), Alvin Ortiviz (130), Joe Sagona (135), Nick Garcia (140), Chris Galvez (145), Matt Garcia (152), Brian Lira (160), Chris Smith (171), Robbie Odell (189) and Jack Flores (215).

Frank Sagona, Solis, Nick Garcia, Ortiviz, Galvez and Odell were seniors. Lira and Flores were juniors and Joe Sagona, Matt Garcia and Smith were sophomores. The Sagonas and Garcias were brothers and Smith grew up with the four of them.

"Joe and I and Nick and Matt and Chris were all like family," Frank Sagona said. "We had a family atmosphere with the team and in the wrestling room and we all had each others' backs. I think that atmosphere we had helped us wrestle above our capabilities."

Smith agreed with Frank Sagona.

"Everybody on that team just cared so much about each other," Smith said.

South led wire-to-wire at the 1997 state tourney, scoring 122 points. Grand Junction Central was second and Alamosa third.

Odell whipped Palisade's Tyler Hawkins 12-3 and Flores drilled Sterling's Philip Willey 19-7 for state titles, and Frank Sagona was a runner-up. Couple that with fourth-place finishes for Nick Garcia, Matt Garcia and Galvez and the Colts secured the team crown.

"That was a great season," said Flores, who ended the year with a 30-0 record. "To be undefeated and help the team win state is something that I never have forgotten about. It seems crazy that 10 years have gone by because it just seems like yesterday when we won state."

The championship experience was especially sweet for Odell. He missed the 1995-96 wrestling season because he blew out his knee that fall while playing football.

"Those titles were very special to me," Odell said. "It was really tough for me to miss my junior year of wrestling and to finish my senior year with a state championship meant a lot."

Sisneros said the foundation for the Colts was laid during the summer of '96.

"We believed from the start of the 1996-97 season that we had the potential to win state," said Sisneros, who was elected into the Greater Pueblo Sports Association Hall of Fame in 2002. "Before the season (in the summer), we had gone to tournaments in Las Vegas, Reno, Fargo and Illinois and we performed very well. What I think made our team so strong was that we had some good seniors mixed in with some great sophomores."

Although the Colts had no shortage of talent, they weren't wrestling to their potential after Christmas break that season.

"We went to a tournament at Moffat County and we finished fourth out of eight teams," Odell said. "When that happened, we were like 'wow' we have to step it up."

They did.

Odell pointed to South's 36-31 win over perennial power Alamosa as the turning point for his team.

"Teams from Pueblo at that time weren't very competitive with Alamosa," Odell said. "When we beat them, that really gave us a boost and everything just started clicking for us."

Frank Sagona knows the 1997 team left a permanent mark on the South program.

"I take a lot of pride in what we did and all the guys on that team do as well," he said. "I think we showed the way for the teams that followed us and the success that the program has had."