

University of Iowa Wrestling Media Conference

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Tom Brands

Wrestling Team



Q. Can Spencer Lee be a leader as a guy that works hard?

TOM BRANDS: Spencer Lee is an awesome ambassador for our program all the way around. The thing is he's still only a true sophomore, 20 years old. We don't expect him to start rah-rah leadership type stuff, stuff that might be out of his comfort zone.

But he is a leader just being in that wrestling room. The way he competes, the way he holds himself, the way that he looks to his future, win, graduate, do it right template. It was made for him, or he came in and maybe that's what inspires him.

But we got great leadership all the way up at the top. He fits right in with that philosophy. We love it.

Q. His style, is that exactly what you want?

TOM BRANDS: He scores a lot of points. That's what we want. We want guys that score points. Not only match points, but match points equal bonus points for the team. You saw that last year.

You talk about what kind of influence does he have. Well, he inspires guys to wrestle like Spencer Lee, be like Lee, score a lot of points, turns into bonus points. We scored 30 bonus points in the national tournament last year. Been a while since we've done that.

Spencer Lee led all champions with the most points scored in that tournament. It's a testament to how he trains, his mindset, what he puts on his shoulders for this team.

Q. What, if anything, does he have to guard against with all the expectations?

TOM BRANDS: I don't think you guard against anything in this sport, any sport, or anything in life. You go out, get what you want. He's going to have adversity. He knows that. He was raised that way. His dad is a high-level Judo coach. His mom is a high-level Judo athlete.

He was raised, there's going to be adversity. Go out and take what you want. When things don't go the way you want, get up like a big boy, just back on the horse and giddy up again.

Nobody does that better probably than wrestlers. What I mean by that, it's evident if you do it or not. You can see it out there in a match, you can see it in the practice room. It's a one-on-one sport. You're naked out there. Spencer Lee embodies that with the best of them.

Q. One thing to have a leader like that, but you have to have guys willing to match it. Do you feel from top to bottom you have guys that are willing to do that?

TOM BRANDS: I'm going to let those guys speak for themselves. One of the things that we love about this team is that these guys speak for themselves. I don't know if I can speak for everybody and say that everybody is in this mold. We want everybody in that mold. It's going to take 10 weight classes to win a national title. That's where the message may get a little stale here.

We haven't had 10 weight classes. We got some new faces. We had two new faces last year. We had Marinelli, Spencer Lee. Fans are excited about those guys returning. You guys talk a lot about Spencer Lee. Let's talk about Marinelli. What does he bring to the table? He's a ferocious competitor. We love him. He lives the right lifestyle. He's the voice in that locker room. He'll go nose-to-nose with somebody in that locker room if they need it.

You look at the new faces we have. We have four returning All-Americans, that means six weight classes are up for grabs. We're really excited about what's going on.

Q. What does DeSanto bring to the program?

TOM BRANDS: He's a new face. He brings an energy and a competitiveness that is contagious. There's a lot out there about, maybe there's only one program for him, that's this program. There's one coach for him, that's this coach.

The way that he competes, sometimes he takes it overboard a little bit. We have to temper that. At the same time we're going to temper that without taking anything away from him edge-wise. We want him to have that edge. We want him to have that competitive fire. I think he's going to be a fan favorite right away. His reputation precedes him. That's a good thing.

Q. Why do you think you had such a productive off-season recruiting transfers?

TOM BRANDS: I think it's a trend that's happening now. We have great staff. We have great people here. Our recruiting effort starts with Gary Barta and Barbara Burke, goes all the way down into our guys that don't have recognizable names in the sport of wrestling right now. It goes through our coaching staff, through our All-Americans, our national champion Spencer Lee. It's very deep.

They see the family atmosphere. We don't say no. We don't say no. If we got the right guy, we're going to get the right guy, we're going to get him. It's not going to be a matter of, Man, can we make this work out? It's going to work out. That's a little bit different approach. Very aggressive.

We've had the pants beat off us in the past. It doesn't do you any good to be number two with the number one guy in the country. You don't get any points for being number two with the number one guy in the country as a recruit. You get a lot of points for runner-up at the national tournament. We don't want to be the runner-up, but you get points for it, not in the recruiting realm.

Q. (Question on Austin DeSanto)

TOM BRANDS: He's good. You guys want to put a tag on him. I'm not putting a tag on him. We love him. My brother wanted to recruit him when he beat Spencer Lee in the state finals. He was already signed, sealed and delivered to Drexel. But there was something there with him that caught his eye even when he was a junior. Spencer whooped him pretty good when they were both juniors.

So, hey, what comes around, it's good for everybody.

Q. How do you strike that balance of making sure he keeps his aggression?

TOM BRANDS: You're putting a tag on him. I'm not. The balance is there. He wants to win badly. That's okay. He's a great student. When I say he's a great student, he's not the most talented, gifted student, but he's a great student because he works hard at it.

Talk to his academic counselor. What kind of kid is he? Very respectful, motivated, do the right thing, win, graduate, do it right. That's him also. It's not someone where the tag that you put on him is necessarily what's accurate. Are you going to take my word for it or are you going to take these people out in Timbuktu's word for it? Take my word for it.

Q. You hear your wrestlers talking about Penn

State around here.

TOM BRANDS: The challenge is great. They try to win a national title by as large a margin as possible every year. We try to do the same. We've fell on the short end of that stick. We know we have work to do. We're doing it. It doesn't change how we go to work.

The relevant thing would be that it's Penn State. We got to beat Hall at 74. We have to beat Nickal at 97 now with him moving up. They have a 33-pounder they like that they're putting in their lineup. We have to beat him. We have to beat them all from everywhere, all corners.

Nothing has changed in that regard either. I mean, we're surrounded. We have a school to the north, a school to the west, schools to the east, schools to the south. The challenge is great, and we're up for it. We're never not up for it. Just got to do a better job. Got to do a better job when it comes to being two, three or four. Two, three or four is easy. One, that's tough. Being one is tough.

Here is the thing. If you want to be the champion, be the champion. That will narrow the gap in and of itself. So we want to be the champion, so let's just be the champion.

Q. Kaleb Young?

TOM BRANDS: Another new face. When I say 'new face,' he's down a weight. He had some time in the lineup last year. We need more of a seven-minute match out of him probably. That's the knock. Blow those matches open, blow those matches open by wrestling hard for seven minutes. If he does that, then he's going to have a successful career.

Going down two weights helps him. He's naturally a 57/65. We tried to get him big to 74. I'm not sure that's the best thing for that guy. He has a high metabolism rate. He's not a guy that lets the grass grow under his feet. He's a close to a 4.0 student. Another one of those win, graduate, do it right guys. Dean's list, president's list. Dean and president probably saw his name come across their desk, just as a student.

He's a Division I athlete. So let's be about that WIN, graduate and do it right.

Q. Have you ever had a weight class as strong as your 141 this year? How will that benefit your team?

TOM BRANDS: It remains to be seen how strong it is. The depth is certainly there. Happel and Turk competing for that spot last year tooth and nail. Then this year Murin winning that spot. Murin has five wins against those guys now dating back to last year. We talked about wrestling Murin as a freshman last year.

Then he had an injury.

We like the depth there. We like our new face, Max Murin. That's not a done deal. That's up to Murin to go out and compete hard.

I don't know if he's shown what he's about. I think he's one of those guys where he's going to compete harder than maybe what he showed, but let's see it. What I mean by that is in the wrestle-offs. He won two matches with first period takedowns. When you're trying to win a match with a first period takedown, I don't know if your mindset is all the way where we want it. There's a lot of familiarity there. Sometimes those wrestle-offs are tough.

I actually thought about right after that match with Turk, walking up to both of them saying, We're going to go again at the end, just seeing what would happen, what would happen, what their body language would be like.

We have to do what's best for individuals first.

Q. Michael Kemerer at 174, starting to fill into that weight?

TOM BRANDS: Yeah, he's a big, strong man. He's someone that we work hard on every day to be the best that he can be. Doesn't matter what weight class. He's in that same mold. His name across the dean's desk. He's on the dean's list.

You can see that we have a shift in culture maybe. It's because of the directive from above, the communication. Liz, all the academic people. But it's also a tribute to our young men, too, that this is important to them.

Our academics are definitely as strong as they've ever been, as well. That's not something that I'm just slipping in there to make the program look good. I mean, this is real. This is win, graduate and do it right. That's real. It's not fake.

Q. Marinelli, what did he learn in the postseason?

TOM BRANDS: Marinelli is a guy that loves to win. When things are going right, he's hopping, feels really good about himself. When things don't go so right, he tends to hang onto it maybe too long. I think that's probably the biggest thing he's had to adjust.

We've thrown some things at him in the summer that hopefully have made him I'm not going to say grow up because he's very mature, he's getting married next summer, but he's a very mature guy. He hangs onto this stuff too long. We've done some things with him where he's going to have to move on quicker.

He had an undefeated season as a freshman through

that dual-meet season. He lost the first match in the Big Tens, couldn't really get over it, even though he had two big wins after that. Then he had another hangover with the same guy or whatever. Then he had another hangover with a guy he'd beaten twice.

The thing about Marinelli, I'm probably guilty of being in the same category, is people want to give it to you. They'll make up stuff. They'll misrepresent a lot. You hear a lot about fake news. I tell you what, it's fake news propaganda against that guy because he wants to win so bad, and he wears his emotions on his sleeve, says exactly what's on his mind. That's locker room material. You have to watch it. Why go there? Why put it out there for people to kind of want to knock your block off? But that's who he is. There's nobody probably more fun to go after than a guy that is like that.

But if you're going to be like that, you got to walk the walk, you got to talk the talk. He knows that. So he's matured.

What does he got to do? He's done it, he is doing it. We'll see. But he's real, real important to our program from a leadership point of view and how he competes. Him and Kemerer are kind of the ones that brought it back. Lee definitely winning the national title. But just how he's ready to go every day. He's clapping his hands. He's ready to go for us. Can't beat that energy.

Q. Outside of 141, what were some other reactions?

TOM BRANDS: We have to score more points. That comes down to when I talked about familiarity. First period takedowns, it's a hard way to make a living in this sport. If you're going to get a first period takedown on me, you're not going to beat me. You have to keep scoring.

We play a lot of matches to our team. The examples that we show, it doesn't matter if you get the score or not, just keep wrestling. I'm not sure that our guys kept wrestling. We won some close matches where we actually had the benefit of a first period takedown, but if you rely on that, it will bite you.

That's probably what I see more than anything. I think we have some depth that everybody's talking about. We have Jacob Warner, who is not going to be in the lineup this weekend because he just got back -- he just got back in the middle of the third week in September from the World Championships. He needed a break. That's important for us. He's been training. He hasn't missed a beat. Just to go from the World Championships from September right into the season, we got to do it right. He'll go either against Princeton or for sure against Purdue. If you see him not in the

lineup, don't freak out, so on and so forth.

We have to keep getting better. We have to get better every day. Kirk Ferentz says it best. That's the orders he gives his troops. That's what they march to, get better every day. We got to worry about what's in front of us.

I've learned from that from him over the last decade or longer. That perspective is a very healthy one. Then you got to make the adjustment. Then you got to put the results in the right column.

Q. (Question about Wilcke)

TOM BRANDS: I'm glad you brought him up. His athleticism will come out more at 84. I said that all along. I said that when he was at 197.

When you're Wilcke, you're a dynamite athlete, you have all these tools, quickness, explosion, I think you'll be able to manage matches better. I think it's going to work way more in his favor getting down to 184.

He looks different, but he doesn't look sucked-out different. He's leaner, he's meaner, hungry like a wolf, not a fat cat on the back of a couch on a sunny day in the window basking, being lazy, eating and feeding, all those things. But he's on the prowl, he's on the hunt. He's like a wolf. Long, lean legs, go off bunny rabbits, all kinds of things that are fun to eat. Can't get away from you because you're faster, stronger, leaner and meaner. That's how I would describe Wilcke.

Not to say he's an automatic that he's going to do better there. That's up to him. But I like him there, plus it makes our team better.

He won a match Friday in a lopsided fashion against a guy who I think very highly of. Mitch Bowman was a round away from placing last year. That's no slouching. That's what I told Cash Wilcke after his match. I said, You beat a guy there that I think pretty highly of.

This is not just a guy where you were the guy, automatically he should have won that match. Mitch Bowman is game. What we saw in the wrestle-off situation where there is depth there.

But you know what, Wilcke, if you're the champion, be the champion. You know what, Spencer Lee, if you're the champion, then be the champion.

I tell you what, it's a blast in that dressing room, a lot of fun. These guys are solid in a lot more ways than just being great wrestlers, they're solid people. They are a lot more than just a blast to watch. Blast is a metaphor for a lot of things. A blast is like an explosion, put you on

your noggin. A blast to watch, a blast to stop, a blast to kaboom, bam. There we go.

Let's get in the season, see what we can do.

Thanks for coming. I appreciate it.