

Wrestling: Big Ten Championships Preview — Hoffman and Orndorff



This weekend, Ohio State wrestling will send 10 wrestlers to Lincoln, Neb., to compete for individual titles and a team championship at the Big Ten tournament. Sammy Sasso and Carson Kharchla lead the charge as No. 1 overall seeds in their respective classes.

The Buckeyes took ninth in the 2021 Big Ten Championships with 69 1/2 points — well behind champion Iowa, who won the event with 159.5 points. Sasso won an individual title at 149 pounds, while Ethan Smith, Kaleb Romero and Tate Orndorff finished in the top-five for their weights.

Ohio State (5-3) enters the tournament fifth in the Big Ten standings behind Penn State, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin, looking to secure its first conference championship since the 2017-18 season. The Buckeye wrestlers will need strong performances from each weight class to accomplish their goal, starting with 125-pound wrestler Malik Heinselman to 285-pound heavyweight Tate Orndorff.

Before the team competes this weekend, Buckeye Sports Bulletin details each Ohio State wrestler's season and their path to winning an individual title.

Malik Heinselman and Dylan Koontz

Dylan D'Emilio and Sammy Sasso

Bryce Hepner and Carson Kharchla

Ethan Smith and Kaleb Romero

197 - GAVIN HOFFMAN

Hoffman's emergence has allowed him to hold down the 197-pound weight class for Ohio State this season. Head coach Tom Ryan has been impressed with the redshirt junior's motor, claiming that Hoffman works tirelessly in practice and training to improve his skills on the mat.

"His tenacity and relentlessness to continue fighting, regardless of who stands in front of him, inspires our locker room," Ryan told BSB in February. "There are small, small things that decide whether a wrestler wins or loses a match. Hoffman didn't have things fall in his favor against Iowa and Penn State, but, man, did he fight hard."

Hoffman faced then No. 4 Jacob Warner of Iowa on Jan. 21, losing a hard-fought decision to the Hawkeye All-American. Warner took an early lead with a takedown before receiving a stalling call, which awarded Hoffman his first point. The wrestlers traded takedowns and escapes heading into the final two minutes. However, Warner had racked up significant riding time, allowing him to stall in the closing period to secure a 6-5 win.

Two weeks later, the Ohio State coaches called Hoffman's name again — this time to face No. 2 Max Dean of Penn State. Dean collected nearly two minutes of riding time approaching the end of the second period before Hoffman scored the match's first point with an escape. Both wrestlers earned reversals in the third and Dean took the riding time point to take the bout to sudden victory.

Dean and Hoffman traded shots in the extra period, with the former securing a 5-3 victory from a takedown. Despite the loss, Ryan was encouraged to see Hoffman continue battling until the referee raised his hand to award Dean the match's final two points.

"You could see the look in his eyes," Ryan said of Hoffman's effort. "He wanted to win. The best of the best find a way to win those close matches, and I think Hoffman is starting to understand that, but Dean took the match this time. It was another learning experience."

On Feb. 5, Hoffman earned another start in Piscataway, N.J., against No. 6 Greg Bulsak of Rutgers. Ryan said he didn't think twice about sending Hoffman out to wrestle his third-consecutive top 10 opponent.

Hoffman scored first with a reversal in the second period after starting on the bottom. He allowed Bulsak to escape, bringing the match to 2-1 after five minutes. Bulsak tied it with an escape in what would be the final point of regulation. For the second straight bout, Hoffman was headed to sudden victory.

In enemy territory, Hoffman dug deep and secured a match-winning takedown in the extra period to take a 4-2 decision against one of the nation's best at 197 pounds. At long last, Hoffman was rewarded for his hardwork and Ryan was awarded for his faithfulness.

"We're proud of him," Ryan said. "He keeps working. He has earned everything that came to him and everything that will come to him will be a product of his hard work. He works his butt off. He's competitive, and he shows incredible sportsmanship and humility in the face of failure. Ask anyone in the locker room and they will tell you about this guy's integrity. I couldn't be more proud of him."

Hoffman's slow rise has Ryan confident in his performance at the Big Ten Championships. The Montoursville, Penn., native earned the No. 9 seed after finishing 11-7 with a 6-5 (4-4 Big Ten) dual record. He recorded two major decisions and one technical fall against his opponents.

Nebraska's Eric Schultz earned the No. 1 seed in the weight class. Dean earned the second slot, with Michigan State's Cameron Caffey, Iowa's Jacob Warner and Michigan's Patrick Bucki rounding out the top-five.

285 - TATE ORNDORFF

Orndorff will compete in the highly-competitive heavyweight division at the Big Ten Championships. The former All-American earned the No. 8 seed in the class, with Olympian Gable Stevenson taking the No. 1 seed, world qualifiers Tony Cassioppi of Iowa and Greg Kerkvliet of Penn State claiming the next spots, while Mason Parris of Michigan and Lucas Davison of Northwestern fill the rest of the top-five.

“There are guys in this bracket that are really, really tough,” Ryan said. “There’s an Olympic champion and world champions. There aren’t any other divisions like this in collegiate wrestling. There’s no rest for the weary here in this conference, and this division is a fantastic example of that.”

Orndorff’s All-American season last year included an 11-11 record with three major decisions and one pin. He placed fifth at the 2021 Big Ten Championships and seventh at the NCAA tournament. This season, the Spokane, Wash., native, went 14-6 in 2021-22 with a 7-4 (3-4 Big Ten) mark in duals, claiming three major decisions and two pins.

“Winning a Big Ten title won’t be easy for him,” Ryan said. “It’s a big weekend for him to see how he stacks up against some of the best competition in the country. We want to get him out of there and into the NCAAs, but it will be a real challenge for him.”

Orndorff’s experience should prove helpful for the redshirt senior. He was a two-time NCAA qualifier at Utah Valley University before he transferred to Ohio State in 2020. He ascended as high as No. 3 nationally with his former program, holding a 44-13 record in his two seasons at Orem, Utah.

While Orndorff will fight an uphill battle and would face Stevenson in his second match, the Buckeye wrestler could shock the wrestling world with a win. Should Orndorff lose that match, he likely will still earn an NCAA qualification with his resumé.