

Wrestling: NCAA Championships Preview — Sasso and Kharchla



Ohio State wrestling finished fourth behind Michigan, Penn State and Iowa at the 2022 Big Ten Championships, qualifying eight of 10 wrestlers for the NCAA Championships March 17-19 in Detroit.

While Ohio State head coach Tom Ryan wanted all 10 starters to qualify for the national tournament, he recognized the unique challenge of competing in the Big Ten, a conference he described weeks ago as “the third toughest country in wrestling” behind Russia and Iran. In other words, the Buckeyes’ eight qualifiers are a testament to the program’s strength, rather than evidence of weakness.

Malik Heinselman (125 pounds), Dylan D’Emilio (141), Sammy Sasso (149), Carson Kharchla (165), Ethan Smith (174), Kaleb Romero (184), Gavin Hoffman (197) and Tate Orndorff (285) will represent the Buckeyes on the national stage.

“Every wrestler in our program chases mastery,” Ryan said. “We saw a lot of great things from those (eight) wrestlers late in the season, and their work is paying off for them. We learned some things that we can grow from at the conference tournament, and we know what environment we will be in at the NCAAs. The Big Tens was packed, and this NCAA Championships will be the same.

“We’ve had 10 wrestlers compete many times at nationals, but we didn’t get 10 this year. But the guys we do have the fight and know that we will need more fight our next time out. There’s even less margin for error at nationals. It’s so competitive, which means we need to put seven really good minutes on the mat. These guys are ready to do that.”

In this article, Buckeye Sports Bulletin previews two of the eight wrestlers to compete at the NCAA Championships. We continue with Sasso and Kharchla.

Heinselman and D’Emilio

149 - SAMMY SASSO

Sasso will make his third NCAA Championships appearance after a runner-up finish at the Big Tens last weekend. The Nazareth, Penn., native failed to defend his 149-pound title against Wisconsin’s Austin Gomez, who claims the No. 2 seed at the national tournament.

Ohio State assistant coach J Jagers said Sasso looked tight in the Big Ten Championships. However, Jagers thinks the national tournament offers another opportunity for him to prove that he is one of college wrestling's best performers.

"The story for Sasso in the national tournament will be whether or not he cut himself loose," Jagers said. "He's been wrestling tight, and he knows that. It doesn't take a keen eye to see that. He's got to get to his attacks. He's a great shooter. The evidence might not indicate that, but I watch him practice every day, and I've watched him cut loose. He's got many different ways to get to the legs and go from the open."

Sasso was the No. 3 seed at the 2020 NCAA Championships and claimed the No. 1 seed last year, finishing second behind North Carolina's Austin O'Connor. In the final seconds, the match ended with a controversial no-takedown call for Sasso, which Ohio State challenged. Still, the call on the mat stood, and O'Conner walked away with the 149-pound title.

He spent most of the 2021-22 season at the top of the national polls and finished with a 21-2 record, including three major decisions, four technical falls and three pins. His resumé allowed him to take the No. 4 seed at this year's NCAA Championships.

"Sammy's got tremendous tension, strength and position," Jagers said. "He's very surgical when he gets to the leg. It can take him a while to finish sometimes, but he knows exactly what he's doing. He puts a lot of pressure on his opponent, so for him to get out, he's got to cut loose and wrestle free."

165 - CARSON KHARCHLA

Kharchla will make his first NCAA Championships appearance this season after missing all of 2021 with a knee injury. He qualified for the tournament after finishing fourth last weekend at the Big Tens.

This year, Kharchla went 21-3 and claimed the No. 1 seed at the conference championships last weekend. He lost two matches in sudden victory, including a third-place bout to Wisconsin's Dean Himiti. His performance earned him the No. 7 seed in the NCAA tournament, where he will face No. 26 seed Lucas Revano of Penn State in the first round.

"Carson's been in some major events," Ryan said. "I think the biggest thing is a culture in the program. There's a high expectation for him. He's around guys that have won multiple championships, and he's trained alongside guys that have won it as a freshman. All he needs to do is believe in himself. It's about making sure that his spirits are high, and he knows he has the capacity. If he strings a series of tough matches together, he can win the NCAAs.

"He was the only (Buckeye) with an attack in the Big Ten semifinals, and he didn't connect. Carson lost those sudden victories because he put himself in a vulnerable position with an attack. I like the aggression, which is why I'm confident in his chances next time out, but I don't know if it was the best time for him to shoot in those matches. Eight out of 10 times when he's the aggressor, he'll connect, but he didn't that time. Carson will learn and turn it around."

Jagers believes Kharchla's performance at the Big Ten Championships was similar to Sasso's outing. He said that both wrestlers didn't live up to their potential on one of college wrestling's biggest stages. Still, Kharchla can rely on his technique and training to make a deep run in this year's national tournament.

"I don't mean to sound like a broken record, but I think Carson wrestled tight at the Big Tens, and there's probably a lot of variables as to why that happened," Jagers said. "He's a great finisher. I know he didn't finish on a couple of his attacks. His M.O. this season has been finishing quickly."

Kharchla utilized his quick offense against then-No. 1 seed Alex Marinelli of Iowa earlier this season — the most significant victory in his young career. The Powell, Ohio, native, can find success at the NCAA Championships if he remembers how strong a tool his attacking and shooting can become, Jagers said.

"Carson has to stay diligent and focused," Jagers said. "He usually gets to his opponent's legs, but a lot of these guys (at the NCAAs) are good scramblers. His weight class is totally up for grabs. There are quite a lot of guys that can win the tournament. If on Sunday you told me one of the eight top seeds were the champion, none of that would surprise me. Carson is one of them that can win it. It will come down to who can execute best in that in these three days, and I'm confident in Carson."