



Kevin Higley Democrat and Chronicle

Some people call Tom Rosa (top) an 'unorthodox' wrestler. Others say he's dirty. His coach says he's an 'intimidating kind of athlete.'

★ Unbeaten Rosa gets upper hand

R-H Sperry star sets sights on state' crown as senior

By Betty Gordon
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Tom Rosa has a very simple philosophy of wrestling.

"If you let someone get the upper hand, you're for sure going to lose," said the Rush-Henrietta Sperry senior.

So Rosa, the Comets' four-year varsity captain, rarely lets an opponent get the upper hand. His won-loss record of 20-0 with 11 pins proves that and distinguishes him as the only undefeated wrestler in the Monroe County League.

Rosa, who turned 18 years old Sunday,

started the wrestling season in the 177-pound weight class. He won the Monroe County tournament at that weight and was named the outstanding wrestler of the tournament, racking up pins in all four of his matches.

But shortly after Christmas, Rosa moved down to the 167-pound class.

"He was really rather close to it (167) all the time, only two or three pounds over," said Sperry Coach Gordon Gilfilian. "It may be the better weight class for him for sectionals so we'll leave him there for now."

Actually, since Rosa is the Comets' most experienced wrestler, the class with the tougher opponent is usually reserved for him.

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FROM PAGE 1D

"He stands out above the people around him," said Gilfilian. "One kid in practice will give him a good tussle (177-pounder Val Johnson).

"Tom gets the strongest opponent because he has a good shot at the sectionals and states," said Gilfilian. "We're trying to find him the best competition and improve him as a wrestler."

Rosa has been wrestling since he was 10 years old. By the time he entered ninth grade, he already had won the United States Wrestling Federation's Eastern Nationals freestyle title at 175. He says he had to wrestle up because there was no class between 132 and 175. No matter that he weighed about 145.

As a freshman, Rosa wrestled at 145 pounds and was 17-11. He also qualified for the Empire State Games. The next year, he moved up to 155 and was 21-6-1 and second in the County tournament.

The summer between his sophomore and junior years he broke the fibula of his right leg during a summer lacrosse game, a sport where he earned All-America honors as a junior.

"Me and a kid collided on a faceoff," said Rosa of the injury that kept his leg in a cast for almost three months.

He had qualified for the Empire State Games again but "didn't wrestle because that was the week I broke my leg."

The injury forced Rosa to miss most of his junior

wrestling season but he still managed a 14-4-1 record at 167. Each year he finished fourth in the Section 5 tournament. And as a junior he finally placed in the Empire State Games, third in the Greco-Roman wrestling at 178.

Some have called Rosa's wrestling style unorthodox. Others have called it dirty. To Rosa, who also played linebacker for the Comets' football team, it's just his way of channeling his aggression on the mat.

"For every fan that says that to me (about being a dirty wrestler), there's a mother that says 'I love to watch you wrestle,'" said Rosa.

"He's not really the classic wrestler," said Gilfilian. "He's more of an upper body style (wrestler). He's an intimidating kind of athlete."

Gilfilian is the third wrestling coach Rosa has had this year. The influence of several coaches can be seen in his style but Rosa's trying to follow the program Gilfilian has mapped.

"In a way he was held back," said Gilfilian. "He was solid in movement but the teaching of it was in different styles."

"He used to do a lot of throwing," said Gilfilian. "He gets so aggressive he wants to throw people. I'm trying to get him to hold them down. He was trying to get pins off takedowns."

"I've had the different coaches," said Rosa. "It's not that I haven't learned but I developed my own kind of wrestling. I'm not making the stupid mistakes no one told me about," he added, now that Gilfilian has the job fulltime.

He already is being recruited to play lacrosse in college but he also hopes to wrestle. A more immediate goal is to make the state wrestling tournament.

"I want to be on the bus for Syracuse," he said.