



Reed Hoffmann Staff photographer

John Gemmell progressed rapidly from a novice wrestler in ninth grade to a state champion as a 98-pound junior last March in Syracuse.



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John Gemmell (top), working against assistant coach Ron Ashcroft, went 34-0 last season and built a reputation for not making critical mistakes.

Hornell's Gemmell a quick learner

A state champ in only 3 years

By John Smallwood

Staff writer

When he entered Hornell High School as a ninth-grader, John Gemmell wasn't thinking about becoming a state championship wrestler.

His dreams were more about someday helping the Red Raiders win a state basketball championship. But even at the high school level, there isn't a lot of room on the court for a 5-foot-3½ and 81-pound basketball player.

"I had always played basketball," Gemmell said. "I thought I was going to play for the high school, but I realized I wasn't going to be too tall."

"My dad was a wrestler, but he never pressured me to wrestle. Once I got into the ninth grade, he finally persuaded me to give it a shot."

The results have reinforced the theory that "father knows best."

In three seasons, Gemmell, 17, has gone from novice wrestler to state champion.

Last season, he finished 34-0 and won the state title at 98 pounds.

"I really enjoyed wrestling," said

State champion

- **Who:** John Gemmell
- **Class:** Senior
- **Sport:** Wrestling
- **Age:** 17 **Height:** 5-3½ **Weight:** 105
- **Honors:** State champion at 98 pounds
- **Favorite food:** Pizza, Mountain Dew
- **Favorite TV show:** *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*
- **Hobbies:** All sports, collecting cards

Gemmell, Section V's only returning state champion, "but I never thought I'd have the success I had."

Despite his heritage — his father John was a Steuben County champion while wrestling for Hornell — Gemmell's rapid ascent to the top of the state wrestling charts has astounded many.

"It's real unusual for a kid to progress that quickly when he's started the sport so late," Webster coach Rick LaPaglia said. "Nowadays for a wrestler to become a state champion, he has usually started wrestling around the fifth grade. For (Gemmell) to win a state championship as a junior is amazing."

"He has quickness and strength. His offensive technique is solid and he makes few mistakes. He's not the most amazing wrestler I've seen, but he makes

GEMMELL on page 11E

A 3-year journey from rookie wrestler to state champ

GEMMELL from page 9E
fewer mistakes than anyone I've seen."

Gemmell may not have had the size, but from the start he displayed the intangibles that separate championship-caliber athletes from the others.

"John only weighed 81 pounds as a ninth-grader," Hornell wrestling coach Matt Sheldon said, "but right away I could see that he was very athletic and that he hated to lose. He had a strong desire to win.

Gemmell's freshman season was a learning experience. Although he wrestled in the lightest weight class (91 pounds), he still gave up close to 10 pounds to an opponent.

Going against bigger, stronger and more experienced wrestlers, he finished 7-11. However, the seed had been planted.

"After my first year, I realized I was going to stick with wrestling," he said. "I wanted to do well at it, so during the off-season I worked really hard. I did a little bit of weight lifting, but mainly it was just constant drilling to get moves down."

The summer between his freshman and sophomore years, Gem-

mell joined the Southern Tier Wrestling Club, which was run by former Alfred State coach Greg Johnson, who was a three-time NCAA Division I champion at Michigan State.

"Mainly it was learning wrestling techniques and finding the desire to win," Gemmell said of his experiences working with Johnson. "I just gradually improved."

To others it might seem like it happened overnight.

As a sophomore, Gemmell improved to 32-6. He finished fourth at 91 pounds in the Section V Class B tournament but rallied to win the Super Sectionals and qualify for the state tournament.

It quickly became a humbling experience.

Gemmell was pinned in his first match by eventual state champion Brian Fischenich of Huntington. He finished with a 1-2 record and did not place in the tournament.

However, Gemmell had learned again, and that set the stage for last season.

"I was coming off the state tournament where I didn't do too well," he said. "My confidence was kind of down."

It didn't take long for Gemmell to regain his edge. In his first match last season, he rallied from a near-pin situation to beat James Klem of Bath.

"He had beaten me two times before," Gemmell said. "In the first 10 seconds of the match, he got me in a head lock and turned me on my back. But I fought out of it and beat him in overtime. That brought my confidence back up."

Gemmell rolled through the regular season. The building pressure of remaining undefeated never fazed him as the state qualifying time neared.

"The pressure affected me in a positive way because it built my mental toughness up," he said. "You get it in your head that you can't let up now or everything you've worked for all season would be lost."

Gemmell beat Ed Schaefer of Wayne in the Class B sectionals, then in the Super Sectionals to return to the state tournament.

"When I went back to states last year, I was more relaxed," he said. "I wasn't caught up in all the hype. It wasn't new to me because I had

been there before. I was able to just concentrate on my wrestling."

Gemmell dominated Steve Conlon of downstate Kellenberg 12-1 to win the 98-pound title and become Hornell's first state champion.

"It took a while to hit me," said Gemmell, who already has an invitation to the 1994 National High School Wrestling Championships in April at Duquesne. "I think my dad was more excited than I (was) because he realized what I had really accomplished and I didn't."

Away from the mat, Gemmell is quiet and reserved, but once a match starts he leaves little doubt about who is in charge.

"He's extremely aggressive," Sheldon said of Gemmell, who will wrestle at 105 pounds this season. "After winning the state tournament, I wasn't sure how he'd react. They only thing he's doing is working harder. He hasn't lost the hunger."

The experience of the year before served him well. □

Wrestlers to watch

Two state champions and eight state tournament qualifiers from last year graduated from Section V, but there are plenty of talented wrestlers returning.

Hornell senior John Gemmell (98 pounds) is the only returning state champion and will wrestle at 105 pounds. The classes between 91 and 119 pounds should feature some intense wrestling at sectional time.

Along with Gemmell, state qualifiers Leo Urbanelli (91) of Wayne and Brian Schaal (105) of Alexander are in that range. Other wrestlers within those classes include Jason Celestino and Terry Hasseler of Newark; Rodney Frey, T.J. Furgiuele and Ryan Sciarretta of East Rochester; Steve Hovey and Billy Jacoutot of Spencerport; and Jamie Randisi of Webster.

In the middleweight range, state

qualifiers Arkee Allen (126) of Irondequoit, Brian Aparo (132, state runner-up) of Victor and Mike Pecorella (145, state runner-up) are returning seniors. Others in the 126-155 range include Livonia's Steve Swingle (an AAU champion and gold-medal winner at Empire State Games), Kurt Laird of Sodus, Mike Ricci of East Rochester, Josh Vanlee of Newark and Jeff Cooper of Holley.

The upper range (167 to 250 pounds) should be wide open. Most of the top competitors have graduated.

Dan Yonts (177) of Penn Yan was a supersectional finalist. Jack Farnsworth of Newark and Tom Brusco of Marion are among the other top returnees.

— John Smallwood