

Hawkeye fans 'adopt' Gopher wrestler's foe

By Bryce Miller

The Press-Citizen

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — Iowa fans adopted a wrestler Thursday night at the NCAA Championships — even it was only for 40 seconds.

When Chuckie Connor of North Carolina faced Minnesota's Leroy Vega at the Bryce Jordan Center, the pro-Hawkeye crowd in the stands right behind his mat took notice because the Gophers and Iowa comprise two-thirds of the tournament team favorites, along with Oklahoma State.

And when he threw Vega to his back and recorded a first-period pin, the Hawkeye fans roared.

Connor, a native of Levittown, Pa. — just outside of Philadelphia — said he expected to here more cheers against him because of a large Minnesota fan following.

"I said to my coach, 'I'm in my home state and I'm going to be the underdog,'" Connor said. "My coach was like, 'Nope, Iowa's right behind you. They're going to be cheering for you.'"

Seventh-seeded Connor caught Vega, the No. 10 seed, in a move he called "the cement mixer."

Connor threw in an underhook and grabbed the chin, throwing Vega to his back. Seconds later, the Gophers' first wrestler of the night session found his cement officially mixed.

"It was amazing," said Connor, who saluted the Iowa crowd by pumping a fist toward the stands. "That was the best feeling."

If it's up to Connor, the adoption will continue through the tournament.

Connor said he already has adopted the Hawkeyes.

"I helped them out a little bit and I hope they win it," he said. "I just like the way they wrestle. They wear those

plain black singlets and they just go out there and get it done. I just enjoy watching them."

A WIN'S A WIN: Iowa sophomore Eric Juergens found an unusual way to win a match in the second round.

Juergens (32-6) entered overtime against Ohio State's Robert Sessley when officials hit his opponent with a second stalling call of the match. The penalty point allowed Juergens — who had beaten Sessley 12-5 and 3-1 in two other meetings this season — to win 3-2.

COLLISION COURSE?: Two of the 12 undefeated wrestlers entering the tournament claim an even more personal connection.

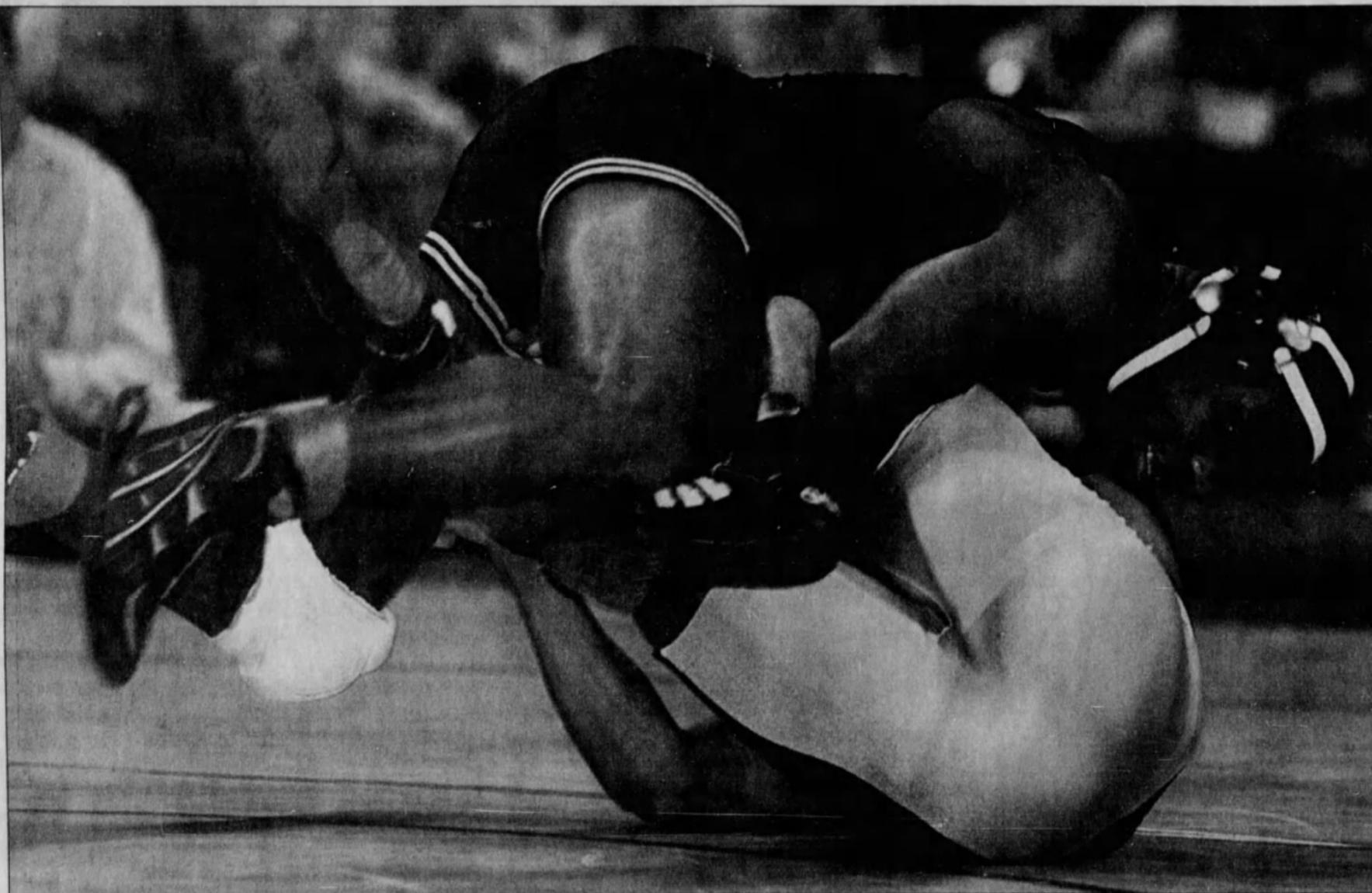
Clarion's top-ranked Mark Angle (37-0) and Central Michigan's Chris Marshall (27-0) used to be roommates when Marshall attended Clarion. Both advanced to today's quarterfinals and, if both continue to win, they will meet in Saturday's finals.

LONG GONE: Although the NCAA Championships have been held in Pennsylvania 12 times, this year's tournament is the first in the state since Penn State hosted the event in 1968.

Penn State also served as the site of the tournament in 1930, 1938 and 1953. The Nittany Lions won the NCAA title during the '53 tourney — the only time a school from the eastern part of the country has won the championship.

WORKING OVERTIME: Three wrestlers entered the tournament with 40 or more wins and all three compete for the same school.

The Hofstra trio of Roman Fleszar (133), Jason DeBruin (141) and Russell Jones (184) each had wrestled at least 47 matches prior to the tournament.



Press-Citizen/Scott Norris

Iowa's T.J. Williams dives into Melvin Saunders of UNC-Greensboro while posting an opening-round pin Thursday at the NCAA Championships.

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NCAA wrestling

■ **What:** NCAA Championships.

■ **When:** Continues with Day 2 today and runs through Saturday.

■ **Where:** Penn State's Bryce Jordan Center in State College, Pa.

■ **Top 5 teams:** After the first day, Iowa has 30 points, Oklahoma State 29½, Minnesota 29, Oklahoma 28 and Cal-Bakersfield 25.

■ **TV:** A replay will be shown at 12:30 a.m. Monday morning, March 22, on ESPN2.

■ **Radio:** KCJJ (AM-1630); and KXIC (AM-800) today (10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 5-8 p.m.) and Saturday (5:30 p.m. championship round).