Cowboys ‘on the upswing’

By J.R. Ogden
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ST. LOUIS — Sometimes a little losing is a good thing. Just ask Oklahoma State wrestling coach John Smith.

Smith’s Cowboys went through three consecutive unbeaten seasons — unbeaten dual seasons, that is. OSU went 21-0 in 1996-97, 20-0 in ’97-98 and 23-0 last season.

“But it was 0-3 at the NCAA Championships during that span, finishing second, third and third.”

“We won too many close bouts and that kind of hurt us,” Smith said Wednesday, a day before the 70th Division I tournament at the Kiel Center. “We needed to lose some of those.

“You need some bad things to go wrong, I think, in a season to make things right.’’

After a 12-5-1 dual record this season, Smith is looking for things to go right this weekend.

Things already are looking up — the Cowboys won their fifth Big 12 Conference title in five years two weeks ago. That was a nice surprise.

“This team has been a surprise at times,” he said.

“There’s no question that we’re looking for one more surprise.

“I think we’re on the upswing.”

A change in emphasis — and a little advice from former Iowa coach Dan Gable — has made Smith a better coach, he said.

“I think when you lose, you have to be careful about what you do,” he said. “It’s not always go back and work harder or go back and chew them out.

“I was a little more gentle on the losses this year . . . tried to keep a positive attitude.’’

And, he said, it helped not having a brother in the lineup.

Smith has coached at least one brother in each of his previous eight seasons.

“I see a lot more now as a coach,” he said. “I always had an eye on the team and an eye on my brother. Now I have two eyes on my team.

“I see a little more, I do a little more. I think I’ve become a better coach without coaching one of my brothers.’’

He’s not expecting a miracle here, however.

“I think we’re in a position here at this tournament to have our best tournament,” he said.

“But, Spates said, all is well.

“We feel a ton better about him now,” Spates said of the three-time Iowa state champ.

Kjeldgaard worked in the pool, weight room, on a bike — and just about anything else — to get ready for this weekend.

“He’s a hard worker who does everything he can possibly do,” Spates said.

• Former Council Bluffs Lewis Central standout David Kjeldgaard was having one of his best seasons at Oklahoma, then he got hurt — again.

• The only other Iowan in the field — not wrestling for Iowa, Iowa State or Northern Iowa, that is — is Arizona State’s Steve Blackford, a former West Des Moines Dowling standout who, at 39-3 and coming off a Pac 10 championship, is among the favorites at 165.

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“I hope he’s in the NCAA finals.”

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Kjeldgaard, 27-3 at 157, had to forfeit his Big 12 championship bout.

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