

Field chasing Hawks

ISU among handful
of NCAA challengers

★ **By Jeff Johnson**

Gazette sportswriter

ST. LOUIS — The college wrestling season started in late November with Iowa chasing Iowa State.

And as it winds down this weekend with the 70th NCAA Championships here at the glamorous Kiel Center, it's exactly the other way around — the Cyclones looking to make up ground on the Hawkeyes.

Any way you want to slice it

WRESTLING

and dice it, though, it's very likely one school from this state will walk away with the team championship. Now let's all guess which one.

"I think this is going to be a great tournament," said Iowa State Coach Bobby Douglas.

"I think based on potential finalists, Iowa and Iowa State are the top guns here," said Oklahoma Coach Jack Spates. "Extra points are going to play a big role, as they have in the past."

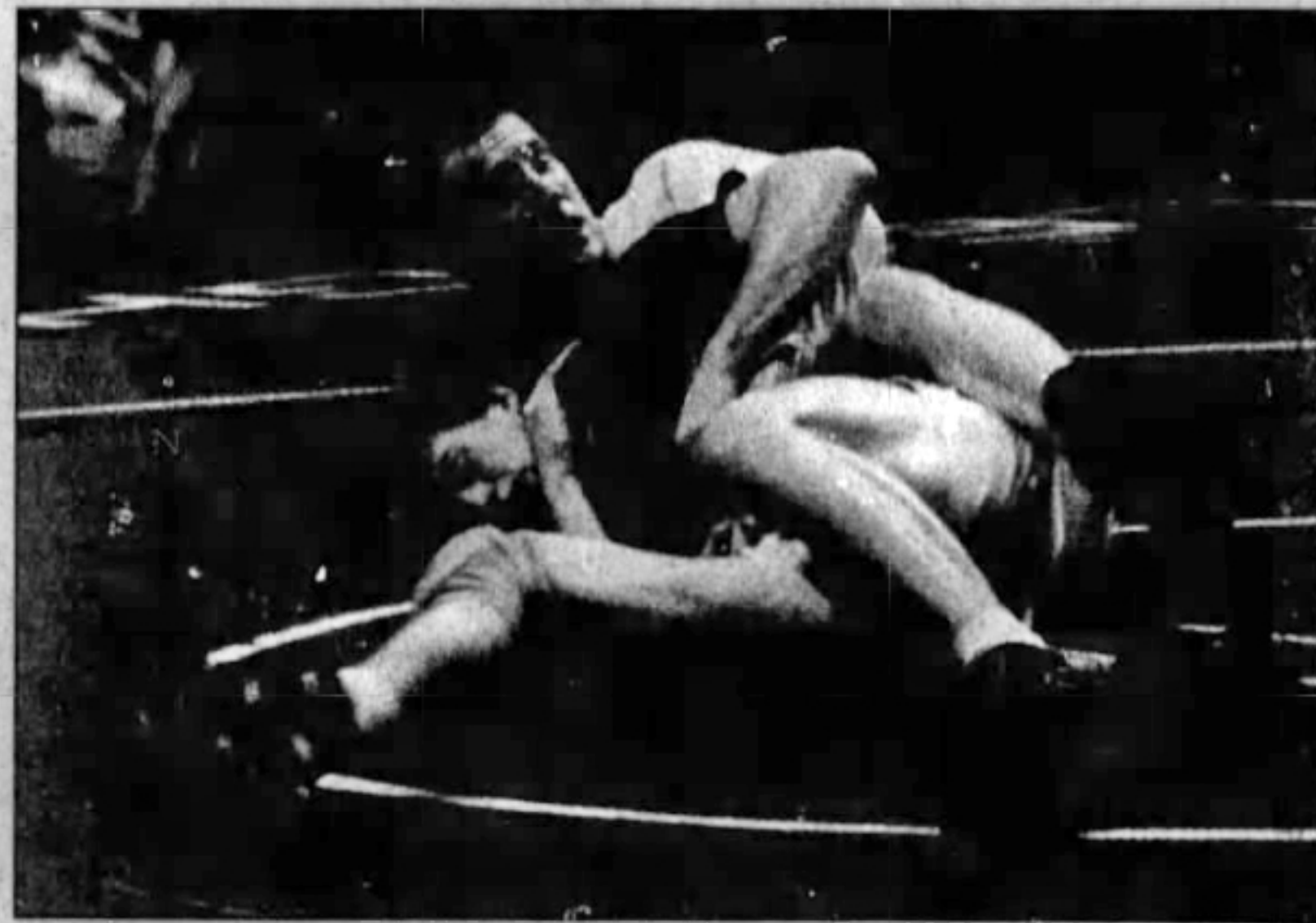
But who will get those extra points? We'll find out starting this morning at 11 when the opening round begins.

From a purely numbers standpoint, Iowa State has a slight advantage because it brings its entire 10-man lineup to the banks of the Mississippi River. That's thanks to an injury by a Missouri wrestler that has allowed Matt Azevedo to make it as a late alternate qualifier at 125 pounds.

Iowa, meanwhile, has nine guys here.

But that does include a pair

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AP photo

Iowa wrestlers Gabe McMahan (front) and Jessman Smith practice Wednesday in St. Louis.

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of defending national champions in 141-pounder Doug Schwab (28-1) and 157-pounder T.J. Williams (24-0).

Yeah, but Iowa State has a defending national champ, too, in 184-pounder Cael Sanderson, who is 35-0 this season and 74-0 in his career.

Yeah, but the Hawkeyes, of course, have won the last five NCAA Championships and eight of the last nine. And they defeated Iowa State in a December dual meet, 24-10.

Yeah, but Iowa State has four guys — Cael Sanderson, 133-pounder Cody Sanderson, 165-pounder Joe Heskett and heavy-weight Trent Hynek — who have legitimate chances of making it to the finals at their respective weights. Possibly five if you want to include capable 197-pounder Zach Thompson.

Yeah, but Iowa has that many potential finalists, too — Schwab, Williams, top-ranked and unbeaten 133-pounder Eric Juergens, second-ranked 125-pounder Jody Strittmatter and third-ranked heavyweight Wes Hand.

See what we mean about this being a golden weekend. Whether it be cardinal and gold or black and gold.

"I don't think there's that much of a gap between us and Iowa State," said Iowa Coach Jim Zalesky. "We're not automatic. You've got to do it on the mat.

"We know the key to being successful here is being consistent every round. We have to take each round one at a time, each match one at a time. If we do that, we'll be right in the hunt."

As likely will a couple of other schools besides Iowa and Iowa State.

Oklahoma State and Illinois also are in the 10-for-10 qualifier club. Oklahoma and Minnesota, which lost to Iowa by just two points at last year's Championships, have nine entrants

apiece.

While those four teams have the quantity, the quality might not be up to Iowa-Iowa State standards. And Minnesota and Oklahoma State are rather inexperienced outfits, too.

"But I think it's going to be a great tournament for the fans," said Minnesota Coach Robinson. "Just like last year, with a lot of teams in the hunt."

"We've been kind of an up and down team this year,"

Oklahoma State Coach John Smith said, whose team beat Iowa State at the Big 12 Conference tournament two weeks ago. "We lost five dual meets. Not that dual meets mean a whole lot, but we're not used to losing.

"We're really looking forward to this event. We'll definitely have to have a good tournament to be a threat here. We have to wrestle well above where we're expected to wrestle."



SPRING

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