

Kearney's Fusilli aims for state title

By LEO ROTH
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Bishop Kearney wrestler Mike Fusilli doesn't make the same mistakes twice. Fool him once, maybe. Fool him twice, not likely.

"I learn from all my mistakes," the senior says.

It was at last summer's Empire State Games where Dan Sanchez of the Hudson Valley Region got a dose of Mike Fusilli's Revenge. Fusilli had lost to Sanchez by a point at the New York State Freestyle Championships in Binghamton to finish third and faced him again in the 192-pound Greco Roman finals in Syracuse. Fusilli won 18-8.

"It was just a matter of confidence," Mike says. "That was a really a key win for me. I'm still riding high off that."

HE CAN SAY that again. Fusilli is 31-1 (unbeaten against local competition) at 215 pounds this high school season with individual titles in four tournaments. He won the Section 5 Class A championship last weekend and will be the favorite in Saturday's Super Sectional state qualifier at Brockport State. Only the winner in each weight advances to the state meet the following weekend in Syracuse.

"Everyone will be tough," says Mike, who was knocked out of the state qualifier by state champ Chris Schöjan of East Rochester at 177 pounds last year. "I'm working twice as hard this week. Mentally, I'm ready."

The Section 5 title was extra special for Mike. As a junior, he was seeded No. 1 in the sectionals, but lost his first match ("Embarrassing," he recalls). Last weekend, he was flawless.

THE TITLE allowed him to match the sectional title won by his father-coach, Leo Fusilli, a three-time City and 1964 sectional champ at East High.

"He still has a lot of his clippings lying around the house," says Mike, who was 29-5 as a junior. "Once in a while, I'll take them out and read them. I get a big psych off

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that."

This father-son combination isn't content with a mere sectional crown, though.

"Mike's goal is a state title," Leo says. "He beat a lot of state contenders over the summer. He is capable of making the states and doing well."

Mike has been wrestling for only four years. He played baseball and ran track before making wrestling a year-round passion. Two summers ago, he joined Mike Cronmiller's Lilac Wrestling Club at Monroe Community College. Today, he has top-notch wrestling colleges like North Carolina, Lock Haven and Slippery Rock interested.

"**I DON'T THINK** you can wrestle just three months a year and be good," Mike says. "The more mat time, the better off you are."

Last summer, Mike also took a silver medal in freestyle at the Empire Games and placed second in the AAU Greco Roman national tournament in Indianapolis.

"Wrestling can be time consuming," he says. "My parents have been good about that. I didn't have to work much in the summers. Some kids don't have that chance."

Mike, a good student, is a hulking 6-1, 195 pounds. He is usually lighter than his opponents but also much quicker.

"I don't rely on strength," he says. "Most guys have the weight on me. I rely on speed in the neutral position. Most bigger guys aren't that fast."

"He just has a great willingness to win," his dad adds.

MIKE CREDITS much of his success to his family. His mother, Joanne, tapes all of his matches. Around 40 aunts, uncles and cousins can be heard screaming in the background.

And of course, there is his father.



Karen Mitchell/Times-Union

Bishop Kearney heavyweight wrestler Mike Fusilli (front), 31-1 this season, has picked up a lot of pointers from his father/coach Leo, a Section 5 champ at East High in 1964.

Coach and son have their differences, but somehow it all works out.

"It can be tough," Mike says. "He may want me to wrestle one way and I might want another. But I usually do what he says. He has the experience."

In turn, Leo Fusilli has learned a lot from his son.

"Mike's styles (Greco and freestyle) are way beyond my limits," Leo says. "But there are also basic

things that worked for me I feel can work for him. But he has helped the entire team with his knowledge. I learn from him."

Although Leo never pushed his son into wrestling, he is glad Mike took up the sport. "It's brought us close together," Leo says. "We're constantly around each other. I know when he goes off to college, I'm going to miss him a lot."

They already have some great memories.