

## A true heavyweight: McCovey wins state title

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Del Norte's Roger "Bronc" McCovey now has his own page in the record books.

McCovey, who brought an undefeated 35-0 record and a No. 1 ranking state ranking in the heavyweight division into the California Interscholastic Federation wrestling championships, added six more wins to that total to become the first grappler in the Humboldt-Del Norte League to bring home a state championship.

"He just took it one match at a time all season long, and didn't take anyone for granted," Del Norte head coach Aaron Schaad said. "Roger is really humble, and a really likable kid. If you're going to hang a state title on someone, he's a good one to hang it on."

It's not as if McCovey hadn't prepared for this sort of stage, having competed successfully in plenty of tournaments in various parts of the country.

"Every coach in the league was here, and they were telling me to bring home the state championship," McCovey said by phone after his 2-1 victory over previously unbeaten and Cal Berkeley-bound Dominic Galas of Central Catholic High School in the championship match Saturday night.

The victory over Galas ended a season that saw McCovey finish with an unblemished 41-0 record and put himself at the top of who's who of high-caliber athletes who have donned wrestling

singlets and made names for themselves in the H-DNL and beyond since the early 1960s.

As if that weren't enough, McCovey did not surrender a single point to an opponent via takedown all season long, allowing just escape points to be scored against him from match one.

"People who don't know wrestling don't understand just how big of a deal this is," Del Norte assistant coach Clint Schaad said. "There are no divisions in wrestling, so you're competing against the best kids in your weight class in the entire state of California."

Having been a part of wrestling themselves from a very young age through youth wrestling, as Warriors and ultimately at the college level at Southern Oregon University, both Clint and older brother Aaron, now in his first season as Del Norte's head wrestling coach, have seen their share of accomplished athletes and accomplishments in their time.

"We've had wrestlers in this program place at the state tournament before (most recently Luke Hartwig in 2000 and Brent Jacot in 2002), so I had hopes that it would eventually happen again," Aaron Schaad said.

Even though the feeling that the time would come for a Warrior grappler to once again stand on the podium with a medal around his neck, nobody could have predicted this.

After failing to qualify for the state tournament as a freshman and having the flu bug derail his dreams last season, once McCovey stepped into the wrestling room for the first day of practice in this his junior season, the Warrior coaches, and soon others throughout the Humboldt-Del Norte League and beyond, began to take notice that something

special was in the works.

Following a 10-4 victory over the then No. 4 ranked wrestler in the state at the Liberty Tournament in mid-December, eyes all of a sudden started popping open that much wider.

"One of my coaches when I was wrestling had a philosophy that as a coach you set up a schedule where your kid can get beat," Aaron Schaad said. "After Roger beat the No. 4 ranked kid, we started looking around for the top competition we could find."

Mission accomplished, literally.

As McCovey continued to cruise through the competition both in and out of the H-DNL with relative ease, all of a sudden what was believed to be the most intriguing match possibility of the season popped up. McCovey and the Warriors were set to compete at the prestigious Mission San Jose Tournament in Fremont. It was there that McCovey, if the brackets played out, would face then No. 1 ranked heavyweight Jonathan Zamora of Clovis High School in the championship match.

The stars aligned perfectly, as McCovey, then ranked No. 3, faced Zamora, himself undefeated at that point in the season, in the highly-anticipated championship match.

All McCovey did was register a pin in an astounding 1:01, both planting Zamora on his back and supplanting him in the rankings at the No. 1 spot in the state.

"Zamora was No. 2 in the state last year, was ranked No. 1 in the state when Roger wrestled him this year, and Roger pinned him in a minute," Aaron Schaad said. "After that match Clint and I decided we'd start to set the standard a little higher."

No matter how high the bar was set, McCovey simply ran, or wrestled, over each and every one of them, barely breaking a sweat throughout a majority of the rest of the regular season.

"I knew after I pinned Zamora at the Mission San Jose Tournament that I was going to win state," McCovey said.

Although the unblemished record throughout the regular season, and the way in which he was piling up wins, was impressive, the Warrior coaching staff had a major concern heading into the postseason.

"He'd put in the extra time and done everything we'd asked him to do in order to prepare (for the state tournament), but he hadn't had any real challenges," Aaron Schaad said. "Once he got to the state tournament I knew he'd have to work and he'd have to be able to wrestle for six minutes every match."

McCovey needed every bit of his god-given athletic ability to survive his heavyweight bracket, winning his first match of the weekend via his customary pinfall before going the distance in his final five matches.

His coaches had one simple message for him.

"You're an athlete, just be an athlete," his head coach said.

With that straightforward but simple message in mind, McCovey did the rest, earning his own spot in the record books and achieving both goals that he had set for himself from the first day of practice.

"I wanted to finish this season undefeated and to not have anybody take me down all season," he said. "I was able to do both of those things, and it feels really good."



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And he's only a junior.