

Commonwealth District Wrestling: Martinez won't be elbowed aside

EAGLES JUNIOR ENDURES BULKY BRACE, LINGERING PAIN FROM INJURY TO PURSUE QUEST FOR TITLE

By ADAM HIMMELSBACH

Colonial Forge's Zach Martinez wrestles while wearing a bulky black brace on his left elbow.

It is not the ideal circumstance, but it is better than the alternative.

Because there was a time recently when Martinez's season, and thus his state title aspirations, appeared to be finished.

Those around Martinez remember that incident happening about two months ago. But Martinez can tell you the exact date, Dec. 17, and the exact moment he knew something was wrong.

He was on the mat in the prestigious "Beast of the East" tournament held at the University of Delaware.

He was facing an opponent from a high school in New Jersey. The two locked up, and Martinez used his left hand to steady himself on the mat.

Then his forearm angled forward toward his hand, and something snapped.

"It felt kind of like a pop, and it hurt," Martinez said. "But I'd hyperextended my elbow earlier in the season, and I thought that's what had happened."

Martinez was evaluated by an athletic trainer. His adrenaline was pumping, and he passed his brief test without experiencing too much pain.

So he returned to the mat to finish the match. He gave it everything he had, but eventually the pain became unbearable, and he lost in overtime.

"I would've won," Martinez said, "but then I found out I'd wrestled for four minutes with a broken elbow."

He had suffered an avulsion fracture, in which part of the humerus bone in his left elbow was pulled off.

On the drive home from Delaware, Martinez was brought to a hospital in Maryland.

The first thing he told the doctors, before he knew exactly what had happened, was that he wanted to be able to wrestle in the Commonwealth District tournament on Feb. 5.

His goal was met with cautious hope. Then X-rays revealed that the bone needed to be screwed back together because the fracture was severely displaced. Surgery was required.

“When I met with the surgeon, he was less optimistic that I’d make it back this season,” Martinez said.

But Martinez was determined to return this year. He remembered the sting of falling just short of medalist honors in last season’s state tournament. He remembered how hard he had worked to prepare for this year. He was not going to let it wash away that easily.

After surgery, he gradually began to implement range-of-motion exercises. He gradually worked to regain his strength.

Just over two weeks ago, about a month after undergoing surgery, Martinez was cleared to resume light workouts.

And 10 days ago, he was cleared to hit the mat for practice sessions.

“He’s not your average kid,” Colonial Forge coach Bill Swink said. “He was devastated when he was injured, but he’s such a hard worker. And when the doctors cleared him, he just about jumped out of his skin.”

Of course, light workouts with teammates at practice are different from the intensity and grind offered by an all-day tournament.

So when Martinez arrived at last week’s Commonwealth District tournament, he wasn’t sure what to expect.

Then, about 10 hours after his day at Orange High School began, he walked out of the gym as district champion in the 170-pound weight class.

“It really felt great to get back out there,” he said.

Martinez planned to spend much of this week continuing to regain strength in his left arm and improving his cardiovascular fitness.

His movement is a bit restricted by the bulky brace, and a few of his favorite moves are less effective than they were prior to the injury.

But he is still able to complete his favorite move, the cross-face cradle, and he is still expected to be one of the most dominant wrestlers in his weight class at the Northwest Region tournament, which begins Friday.

“He’s been working so hard to get back,” Swink said. “And he’s really happy to be wrestling again.”

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