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Sports

Emerald's Zane Newton Is Focused On Faith

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With all the success he has achieved, Emerald High School wrestler Zane Newton has plenty of reasons to feel arrogant and very little left to prove on the high school level. Newton has won back-to-back individual Class AA titles, and barring injury, he is likely to win a third later this month, which would only further cement his reputation as one of the top high school wrestlers in South Carolina. But Newton does not carry a sense of entitlement, and another state title is not a foregone conclusion in his mind. That's because all the 160-pound senior has to do to erase those feelings is to think back to a loss in December at Eastside's Southern Slam to Georgia wrestler Colin Gethcart, of Wesleyan, the only defeat

Newton has suffered this season and the first since ninth grade.

Newton has no trouble regaining his humility. "All I've got to do is reach back in my memory and think about getting beat at nationals or getting beat by (Gethcart) earlier this year," Newton said. "It reminds me that I have not arrived. I've got to keep working."

Emerald senior Zane Newton is aiming for his third consecutive individual title in wrestling, but it's his focus on faith that impresses his family and coaches. (Staff photo by T.M James)

NEWTON HAS BEEN involved in athletics most of his life and he comes from a family where participation was heavily encouraged, considering his mother and father competed athletically in high school. "I always felt like it was their job to make good grades and stay in good shape,"

Newton's father, Tommy, said. "Particularly with wrestling, the mental and physical (benefits) will serve them well."

Along with his older brother, Adam, Newton played football at the Greenwood Civic Center and a number of other sports. It wasn't until Newton was in sixth grade he became involved in wrestling on the advice of his cousins from Tennessee. At first, wrestling was just a means for Newton to improve on the gridiron. "I heard wrestling would make you better at football, so I started wrestling," Zane Newton said. "I found out I was better at wrestling than any other sport that I played. I enjoyed it a lot because it's physical, pretty tough and kept me in shape."

Newton got most of his early experience wrestling at the YMCA, and in seventh grade he first began wrestling in junior varsity matches. He credits gaining that experience early with being able to get an edge on opponents in the future.

"Wrestling's something you've got to learn to do. You can't just overnight be good at it and it's a process," Newton said. "I didn't jump out there in the middle of the competition in high school like a lot of kids do nowadays. "I got kind of eased into it with people who were on my level, and I built up from there."

Newton's father doesn't remember his younger son ever having to deal with much of a learning curve with wrestling.

"Zane's one of those kids where he's naturally inclined to wrestle," Tommy Newton said. "I don't ever remember him not being good because he was always winning." Newton took to wrestling so well that his enthusiasm for the sport caught up with his brother Adam, who is two years older than Zane. Adam Newton began wrestling in the ninth grade when his younger sibling was still in middle school.

The Newton brothers couldn't be more different, according to Adam Newton, but they are able to bond over having a common interest in wrestling. "This is one of the few things in which we're similar," said Adam Newton, who is now a sophomore wrestling at the United States Naval Academy. "It's one of the things where we have a common ground. It's been real good for our relationship because we spent a lot of time together."

By the time Zane Newton reached high school, he already had three years experience, two wrestling on the junior varsity level at Emerald. Wrestling at 135 pounds his freshman year, Newton was the Upper State champion and finished third in the state.

A year later he was ready to go even further. **A MEDALIST HIS** first-year of high school, Newton was still an underdog the next year and didn't carry the weight of expectations that have followed him his junior and senior

seasons.

Possessing a unique amount of strength and athleticism, Newton possessed a different style than his older brother.

"He was more elusive and used his speed. As I've learned over the past two years, I've relied a little too much on my strength," Zane Newton said. "I've kind of got away from that this year. I've learned that with high-level wrestling, you can't worry about muscling people. "He's contributed to me by showing me some of his, I guess, finesse techniques."

With his brother Adam as a constant sparring partner and source of feedback, Newton continued improving his sophomore season, but still entered the 145-pound state final bout against No. 1 Don Squires, of Aynor, under pressure. "I was definitely the underdog my 10th grade year. People didn't think I could actually make it all the way," Newton said. "That just drove me on, you know. I had nothing to lose, and it happened to work out for me."

Newton pinned Squires at the 30-second mark of the third period for his first state title, capping an undefeated season.

"I honestly was worried, but I felt like Zane could've had just as much shot as (Squires) did," Adam Newton said. "I was going to wrestle four matches later and Zane won and it was crazy. "I was completely excited but I couldn't dwell on it too much."

Having been able to compete under the radar for the first half of his high school career, Newton became a known quantity after winning his first state title. Repeating the next year was made even more difficult by the fact he spent the fall recovering from a collarbone injury suffered while playing quarterback on the Vikings' football team. "Last year, it was like I was expected to win," Zane Newton said. "It was a lot more pressure -- you've got to make it this time.

"That was pretty tough, but I enjoyed it."

Having elevated to 152 pounds, Newton mowed through the competition once again for his second straight undefeated season, capped by another third-period pin in state finals, this time against Loris' Alfonso Oliver. Now with the chance to complete his high school wrestling career with a third straight title, Newton is at a level where the slightest slip-up in a match is met with surprise. "Zane handles it well," Tommy Newton said. "He seems to wrestle better when he's facing stronger competition, but obviously, there's a lot of pressure because he's expected to do well and if he doesn't, it's big news."

The weight of expectations on Newton is also not completely external. "It's

going to be pretty tough on me if I don't get it because everybody expects me to get it. I feel a lot of pressure from people," Zane Newton said. "I think I put a lot of pressure on myself. These next few weeks are going to be big in preparing myself for that. "Hopefully, I'll get it again."

Even when he dropped his first match in over two years in December at Southern Slam, Newton was barely fazed.

"That just goes back to his character. He was just like, 'OK, I know what I need to do,'" Emerald coach Andy Wright said. "It wasn't like some people might just go to the pot after that when they're losing. It doesn't do anything except make him that much more competitive."

THE BENEFIT OF having a two-time state championship wrestler on his roster has been huge for Vikings coach Andy Wright. Though just a teenager himself, Newton has become someone his teammates look to as an example. "It shows all these other guys what it takes to be there," Wright said. "It makes them push themselves that much harder because they want to become that person. "Everybody sees him in the spotlight and all my younger guys say, ♦I want to be like Zane."

Currently the No. 11 team in Class AA, the Vikings have developed into a well-rounded team with other state title contenders in 145-pounder Skylar Johnson and 152-pounder Dillon Steifle, who credits Newton with motivating him.

"Without him, I wouldn't be here. He pushes me real hard and makes me work," Steifle said. "Nobody's really ever made me work hard to be good. It got me where I'm at now."

Newton has also proven that even with a great deal of talent, hard work is necessary to achieve success.

"We work hard at practice, but ... say we run two miles in practice and do all kinds of conditioning. Well as soon as practice is over, (Newton's) probably going to go run two more miles," Wright said. "That's just him. You can't coach that -- it's just someone wanting to be the best."

STANDING ON THE awards podium after both of his state titles, Newton could be seen wearing a T-shirt that reads: "Jesus Git-R-Done." An active member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Newton's faith is a big part of his life.

"I would say my faith influences my life more than anything else," he said. "With sports, I put a lot of pressure (on myself), and I go to God to settle my nerves. "Before a match, I have to pray because I get nervous and that's my escape. So I just think about Him and how much He loves me. It

calms me down.”

Adds Tommy Newton, “It is tremendous for him. We’re all put here to glorify God, and Zane’s been blessed with a particular set of talents. The two times he’s won state titles he’s worn that T-shirt, and that’s sent a message without saying a word.”

A three-sport athlete, Newton also plays football and tennis for the Vikings. He also frequently fishes and hunts with his father during the fall and spring. A year ago, Newton was unsure whether he wanted to put in the work necessary to compete at the collegiate level. He said last week he’s leaning toward enrolling at The Citadel, where he’d likely try to join the wrestling team. “There’s lots of people who think, ‘Oh, you’ve got to wrestle in college,’” Newton said. “If I go to The Citadel, I’ll probably wrestle. “I kind of know that coach down there, and I figure if I go The Citadel, it’s going to be tough so I might as well go all-in and get the wrestling in, too.”

If he opts not to continue wrestling after high school, it will be a tough transition for Newton. “He expects a lot of himself and he likes showing off his talent,” Adam Newton said. “He has a natural talent, and he likes being out there in front of the crowd, expecting to do well. “That’s what he thrives on.”