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Sports

SKYLAR JOHNSON: Wrestler On The Rise

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When asked to describe the wrestling style of Emerald High School's Skylar Johnson, Vikings coach Andy Wright can't help but chuckle. The 140-pound senior wrestler is far from conventional when he's out on the mat, but he's outlined his own path to success and will be making his second straight trip to the Class AA individual state championships Friday in Lexington.

Johnson, ranked third in the state in his weight class, fell to Abbeville's Josh Cowan by a 17-1 technical fall in the final round of the Upper State meet at Broome last weekend after defeating the Centurions' Zach Lauzon in the semifinals. A year ago, Johnson qualified for the state finals for the first time but didn't place. Johnson will be the second seed from the Upper State this weekend, and will face Chesterfield's Daniel Trexler in the opening round. "He looked good at Upper State. Coming back and beating Lauzon was a big win for him," Wright said. "We're still working on getting him refined with his style and stuff."

Wright has difficulty describing what exactly that style Johnson possesses entails. "He's different. Skylar's got his own style," Wright said. "He wrestles a lot of people, and people don't know how to wrestle him. "He's just got this very strong grip when he latches on to somebody."

Johnson doesn't have the physical strength of someone like his teammate Zane Newton, so he utilizes other assets to outwit opponents. "I'm a defensive wrestler," Johnson said. "I wrestle against bigger people so I use technique and speed."

On most occasions, Johnson is in a position where he anticipates what his opponent will do and reacts off of that. "He'll make the first move and then defend against it and come out on top," Wright said.

Johnson's ascension toward being one of the state's top wrestlers has been all the more remarkable considering he competes with a hearing disability in both of his ears. Johnson wears a hearing aid and during matches he'll frequently communicate with Wright through their own version of sign language. Having perfected this technique for two years, the two are accustomed to working in this way. "My communication with him has gotten better using the sign language," Johnson said. "We create our own sign language, it ain't really the real one. It makes it easier. "Coach will let me do things myself in matches, but when I get really lost, I'll look up to coach and he'll tell me what to do."

Along with improving his communication during matches, Johnson also has gotten better about being a more disciplined wrestler. "He's just more well-defined with what he's doing," Wright said. "He's more comfortable with what he knows, and he's been doing a better job

of staying in shape.”

Part of that has come as a result of competing on the Vikings’ cross country team in the fall. For the Class AA cross country championships this past November, Johnson braided and dyed his hair for the occasion, but he said there won’t be a repeat of that this weekend. “I wanted to do it again, but coach said it would be illegal during wrestling,” Johnson said. “I might do it again after wrestling season. It’s kind of fun.”