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Schojan worth his weight in gold

*ER's standout 177-pound wrestler odds-on favorite to win the states*By LEO ROTH
Times-Union

Chris Schojan walked off the wrestling mat, a wide bandage wrapped around his head, blood trickling from a cut below his left eyebrow, sweat covering his broad shoulders.

The East Rochester senior was battered but not daunted. He pinned LeRoy's Bert Pangrazio in their 177-pound final at last Saturday's Super Sectional meet at Brockport State.

"He (Pangrazio) was a brawler," Schojan said. "I was trying a lot of different moves on him, an outside single and a duck under, but none of that stuff was working. He was just tying up. I went to a basic double and put him on his back and that's when he cut my eye open. That ticked me off so I had to pin him."

Pangrazio was Schojan's 34th victim against no losses, his 20th by pin, and a springboard to a third straight state tournament berth.

Schojan leads defending champ Section 5 into this weekend's meet at the Syracuse War Memorial.

If this were a horse race, you would bet the ranch, Cadillac and swim suit edition of *Sports Illustrated* on Schojan winning a championship.

He is a four-time sectional and three-time Super Sectional champ and a two-time state runner-up.

He is ER's all-time winningest wrestler (128-12), which is saying something since Coach Don Quinn's program is the best around.

He is taking paid visits to the University of Oklahoma next month and Nebraska in April.

So hungry for a state title is Schojan after two near misses, the only thing standing in his way is himself.

And do not bet on that happening. "I take every match like it is life and death," Schojan said. "If I go down there this weekend with that same attitude and wrestle the way I have all year, I don't think anyone can give me trouble."

Schojan is not cocky, just confident. With his experience, he can afford to be.

"The only way he'll lose is if he gets sloppy or careless," said Neil Kerr, editor-publisher of the state's sports writer's newsletter that annually predicts the meet's winners.

Kerr, who has seen the last 15 state tournaments, said Schojan's competition in the 177-pound class will be good, but not exceptional. There are no downstate favorites such as Dan Mayo (Sachem and Penn State), who Schojan lost to by a pin in the finals as a sophomore, or Mike Hines (Queensbury), who Schojan lost to last year 6-3. Schojan is the senior, the man to catch.

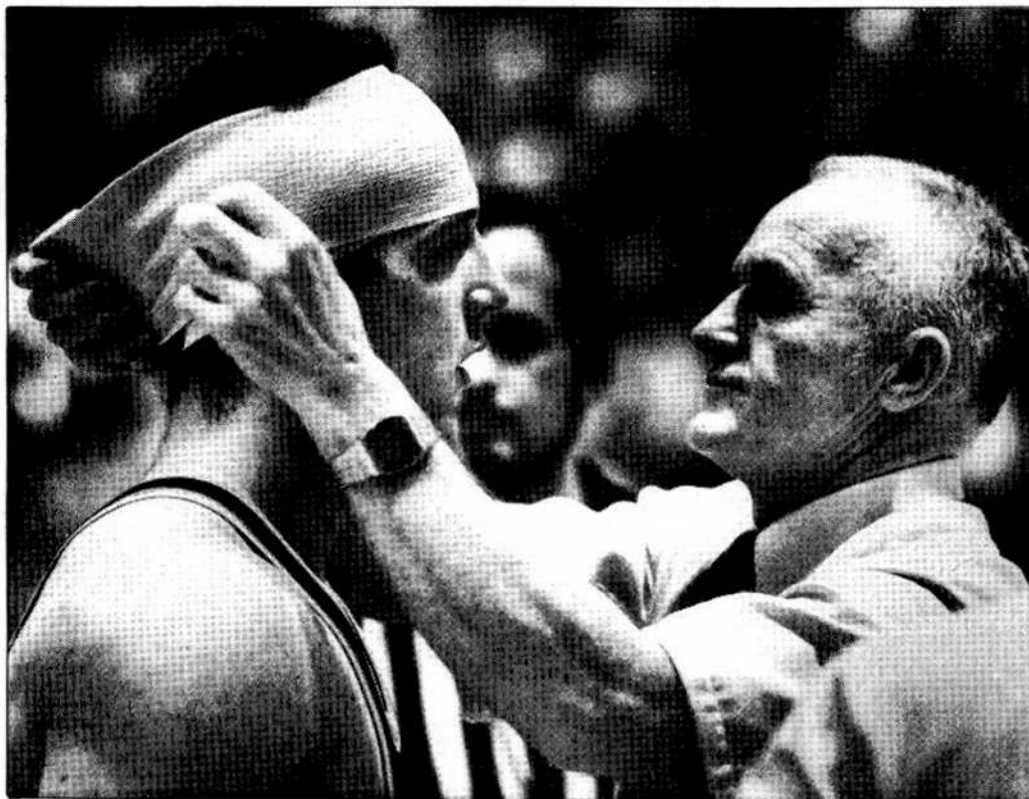
"It'll be a shock if he loses this year," Kerr said.

Those who know Schojan best agree.

"He's determined," his father, Herman, said. "We keep pumping him up with encouragement but I don't think he needs much of that this year."

"There is a lot of pressure on him," Quinn said. "He has been there twice and everyone keeps telling him this is it. But he knows it's his last shot. He doesn't have to be reminded."

"He's the one to knock off," added John Zito, ER's assistant coach who was a state champ with the Bombers in 1979. "If he goes out, attacks everyone and keeps the pressure on, no one will come close to him."



Dennis R. Foss/Times-Union

Chris Schojan gets some help from Coach Don Quinn after cutting his eye during the Super Sectional finals.

SCHOJAN HAD only close match all year. It was against Clarence's defending state heavyweight champ Jeff Ellis in the finals of the Spencerport Rotary-Bernabi Tournament. Schojan, who was 22-0 at heavyweight before dropping to 177 for the County Championships, won 2-1.

"Last spring when I was lifting for football, I weighed 212 and I was thinking about getting to 220," said the 6-foot Schojan, a first-team all-state lineman. "I was thinking about a football scholarship which I never got. I just figured that now my best chances for a state wrestling title were at 177. I beat Ellis once but you never know."

Quinn knew when Schojan was a freshman he had something special. Schojan was thrown into the varsity fires and came out with a 22-9 record at 167 pounds.

"I took him to the North Syracuse Tournament that year," Quinn said. "He had never wrestled a varsity match before and he's up against the No. 1 seed. Of course, I didn't tell him that. So all he does is go out and take the guy into overtime before losing. I knew I had a stud right then."

SCHOJAN WAS 36-2 as a sophomore and 36-1 last year. The spoils of his labor — numerous trophies, ribbons and plaques — clog the basement family room at his home.

Brute strength and a willingness to work have been his trademarks.

"Strength wise, he's probably the second strongest person I have ever wrestled," said Zito, who wrestled at Syracuse

where he met Olympian Ed Banach of Iowa.

Schojan, who started wrestling in the sixth grade, was not born with his large shoulders, arms and thighs. He fell in love with weight training six years ago, the day his father set up a mini gym in their home.

During the wrestling season, Schojan and other ER wrestlers lift weights after their regular three-hour practices.

In the Bombers' wrestling "pit", Schojan's workouts are legendary.

"He grabs anyone he can to work out with and whoever it is is dead tired by the end of practice," teammate Frank Rossi said. "It's amazing. At the end of a tough workout, Chris is still going. It's like he's super human. You can't believe in how good a shape he is in."

"Nobody around our school challenges Chris," Rossi added. "You look at him and he is big and strong but what does he weigh now? 180? In the off-season, he's a lot bigger. He's almost scary. You'd have to be nuts to cross him."

COACHES SAY Schojan has a drive during a match you can't teach.

"He doesn't take any flack," Brighton Coach and County chairman Mark Hoyt said. "He is deliberate with force."

"I'm actually easy-going," Schojan said. "I don't try to hurt anyone when I'm wrestling them. I'm out there to win and so is my opponent."

Don't get the idea Schojan is all brawn and no brains. Unlike past years, his repertoire includes more than one or two moves. Credit Zito, a think tank of holds

who is big enough to handle Schojan.

"It's a whole different game with him around," Schojan said. "He has taught me a lot. I'm a little slicker on my feet and more offensive. John is fast and slick and has the strength to go with it. I've never had anybody like that to work out with before."

Said Hoyt: "All us coaches know the basics but here you have John Zito, right out of college who is up on the latest techniques. You can tell the difference in Chris. He's much more sound. He's not just a big kid. He is good."

In Schojan's four seasons, ER's dual record was 50-6, including last year's 14-0 team that was ranked co-No. 1 in the state.

"Mr. Quinn gets us going," said Schojan, a C-plus student who would like to coach and teach physical education after college. "He says, 'We're the Home of the Champions and we have to work that much harder.' That's why during the season we came in on Sunday mornings to run while other teams were home in bed."

Outside of wrestling, Schojan enjoys listening to music or spending time with his girlfriend, Eileen Gable, a gymnast at ER.

His social life is spartan, though. He does not attend parties and he is often in bed before the 11 p.m. news.

"If I went to a party, I'd be like a zombie," he said.

He has no regrets. He knows respect and success are not easily earned. And he is again four matches away from a state championship.

"And I'm going to do it."