

Three Mountaineers Win SoCon Titles

Written by Paul Blascovich
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Three Mountaineers took home titles and will advance to the NCAA Championships, as Appalachian State University wrestling took second place at the 2012 Southern Conference Wrestling Tournament on Saturday at

McKenzie Arena. Hosted by Chattanooga, this year's event marked the 75th edition of the perennial championship.

Junior Tony Gravely's 2-0 day led to his second SoCon title, while seniors Mike Kessler and Austin Trotman each followed their 6-0 SoCon regular-season performances by capturing SoCon crowns and NCAA automatic qualifier berths.

In addition, head coach JohnMark Bentley was named Coach of the Year and Trotman took home SoCon Tournament Outstanding Wrestler honors. Including the three championships, the Mountaineers totaled eight placewinners on the day, including Kyle Blevins' runner-up finish, third-place showings by Brett Boston and Chip Powell, and a fourth-place performance from Savva Kostis.

Appalachian finished tied with The Citadel in second place in the final standings after racking up 72.5 points. Chattanooga (102 points) captured its second straight team title and its seventh in eight years. Campbell finished fourth with 65 points, while VMI (25.5 points), Gardner-Webb (21) and Davidson (6.5) rounded out the field.

Appalachian's first finalist, Tony Gravely, squared off against No. 3 Richard Alarcon of The Citadel in his semifinal at 125 pounds. Gravely protected a 5-3 lead heading into the final period and scored a quick reversal for a 7-3 advantage. Alarcon struck back, but the 2010 SoCon Champion held strong, and Gravely won 8-6.

In Gravely's final bout, the Mountaineer took on top-seed Manuel Ramirez of Chattanooga. The two combatants remained knotted 3-3 after the first period. Gravely piled on back points in the second period and opened up a 10-5 lead with two minutes to go. Ramirez fought back but couldn't close the gap in time, and Gravely captured his second SoCon title by a 12-9 margin. No. 1 seed Kessler opened the day against No. 4 Zeb Stewart (VMI) at 141 pounds. The Mountaineer scored a pair of takedowns and held on to his lead to advance to the final with a 5-3 decision over Stewart.

In the championship, Kessler returned for his second-straight finals appearance to square off against No. 2 seed Shawn Greevy. In the final showdown, Kessler struck the first points and led 4-1 after the first period, but he was unable to score in the second, and the match remained tied 4-4 heading into the third. In the end, ASU's all-conference grappler piled on the points in the final stanza, and Kessler captured the title with a 9-4 decision.

Appalachian's 184-pounder Trotman scored his first takedown 10 seconds into his semifinal match against No. 4-seed John Dommert of VMI. The three-time NCAA qualifier put on a veritable clinic against the Keydet, racking up a 25-10 technical fall victory early in the third period.

In his fourth appearance in a SoCon title bout, Trotman took on second-seed Robert Prigmore of UTC. Once again, Trotman displayed proficiency at demonstrating takedowns, as the App racked up a technical fall, 21-6 TF1.0 (7:00). Trotman becomes Appalachian State's first three-time SoCon champion since Travis Drake (133) and Mark Fee (165) accomplished the

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feat from 2001-03. Trotman also extended his program-best career-wins count to 124. For his dominant performance, Trotman was named SoCon Tournament Outstanding Wrestler, as voted on by the coaches.

ASU's other finalist, SoCon Wrestler of the Year Blevins, faced No. 5 Justin Guthrie of Gardner-Webb in the semifinal round. In the second minute of the match, Blevins notched a takedown; he added three nearfall points in the first period; and by the final period, he led by double digits. With one minute remaining, Blevins scored the pin, sending him to his third-straight final.

Blevins final opponent was second-seeded Chattanooga's Brandon Wright. The two scored their traditional escapes during regulation, and the bout was forced to overtime, knotted at 1-1. The first minute went scoreless, forcing the foes to tiebreakers. Wright's big move was a reversal in the first tiebreaker, and the Mountaineer was unable to respond as Wright captured the title, 3-2 (TB1).

In his third-place bout, Appalachian 133-pounder Boston led 4-1 over his opponent, Anthony Elias of Davidson. Boston built a 7-1 advantage, but Elias chipped it down to 8-3. Eventually, the ASU junior padded his advantage and earned a 13-5 major decision for third place.

At 157 pounds, ASU senior Chip Powell took on Gardner-Webb's Alex Medved in his wrestleback final. Powell built a 5-0 lead after the first period and kept a 7-2 margin heading into the third. Medved struck back, but Powell protected his lead for an 8-4 decision and a spot on the podium.

Appalachian's final place-winner, Kostis, entered the day as the top seed after receiving all-conference honors. He suffered a close 5-4 defeat to The Citadel's Seth Vernon before picking up a 16-2 major decision over VMI's David Yost. In the placing round, Campbell's second-seeded Mark Hartenstine triumphed with by an 8-2 margin.

At the conclusion of the event, ASU head coach Bentley accepted Coach of the Year honors from his peers. He takes ASU's first such honors since six-time Coach of the Year Paul Mance was selected in 2003.

Attendance at the event was 724, highlighted by an impressive contingent of Appalachian State fans, and sizeable hoards from Campbell and The Citadel. The Mountaineers now look forward to the NCAA Championship in St. Louis, March 15-17. At-large qualifiers to the event are scheduled to be announced on March 8.

Photo Courtesy: John Mark Bentley, ASU Athletics 