

Wrestling: Big Ten Championships Preview — Smith and Romero



This weekend, Ohio State wrestling will send 10 wrestlers to Lincoln, Neb., to compete for individual titles and a team championship at the Big Ten tournament. Sammy Sasso and Carson Kharchla lead the charge as No. 1 overall seeds in their respective classes.

The Buckeyes took ninth in the 2021 Big Ten Championships with 69 1/2 points — well behind champion Iowa, who won the event with 159.5 points. Sasso won an individual title at 149 pounds, while Ethan Smith, Kaleb Romero and Tate Orndorff finished in the top-five for their weights.

Ohio State (5-3) enters the tournament fifth in the Big Ten standings behind Penn State, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin, looking to secure its first conference championship since the 2017-18 season. The Buckeye wrestlers will need strong performances from each weight class to accomplish their goal, starting with 125-pound wrestler Malik Heinselman to 285-pound heavyweight Tate Orndorff.

Before the team competes this weekend, Buckeye Sports Bulletin details each Ohio State wrestler's season and their path to winning an individual title.

Malik Heinselman and Dylan Koontz

Dylan D'Emilio and Sammy Sasso

Bryce Hepner and Carson Kharchla

174 - ETHAN SMITH

Smith is the No. 5 seed at 174 pounds after finishing runner-up to Alex Marinelli last season at 165. All four of last season's semifinalists at 174 return and fill out the group ahead of Smith, including Michael Kemerer of Iowa, Mikey Labriola of Nebraska, Logan Massa of Michigan and top-seeded Carter Starocci of Penn State.

Kemerer won the tournament in 2021 and Starocci took second. The latter bounced Romero in the quarterfinals, leaving the Buckeye wrestler to compete for fifth place. Smith's road will likely involve a

matchup with either of the two competitors at a later round, which provides a unique challenge for the redshirt senior.

Smith has bloomed into a key contributor for Ohio State in the last two seasons. He earned a 15-4 record last year at 165 pounds, finishing 15-4 with five major decisions, one technical fall and a pin. Smith ended with the same record in 2021-22, adding another five major decisions, four technical falls and another pin to his resumé.

“If these guys - Sasso, Kharchla, Smith, Romero - can perform at the Big Ten tournament, then we’ll be in a good position,” Ryan said. “Everyone will be in heaters to win the tournament. If we get them, we’ll all celebrate. If not, we’ll cry together and get back to work.”

Smith will rely on experience to take him far in the Big Ten Championships this season. He’s wrestled in 103 matches in his Ohio State career and is a three-time NCAA qualifier. He placed fifth at the national tournament last year and won All-American honors for his efforts. The Latrobe, Penn., native, will hunt for the same accolades this year at a new weight.

“This weight is more natural for him,” Ryan said. “He had to be incredibly disciplined to wrestle at 165 last season because he’s naturally a heavier person. He’s made sure that he keeps up with his conditioning and his strength to wrestle at this new weight. It’s going to be brutal, but I think he’s ready for what comes next.”

184 - KALEB ROMERO

Romero is the next highest-seeded Buckeye behind No. 1 seeds Sasso and Kharchla, checking in at No. 3 in the 184-pound division behind Penn State’s Aaron Brooks and Michigan’s Myles Amine. Brooks beat Nebraska’s Taylor Venz, this year’s No. 4 seed, for the title last season. He’ll square off with No. 14 Jack Jessen of Northwestern.

“He’s someone who we will count on to go out and win matches,” Ryan said. “He is the ultimate professional. He’s done a really good job, and he is incredibly committed. You never have to question his commitment.”

Romero wrestled at 174 last season, finishing 11-6 with a 5-2 record in duals. The Mechanicsburg, Ohio, native battled through several injuries and a COVID-19 positive during the system that kept him from developing consistency. However, Romero ended the season with five ranked wins and a fifth-place finish at the Big Ten Championships. He also qualified for the NCAA tournament, where he went 2-1.

This year, Romero added weight to compete at 184 pounds. He started the year with an undisclosed ailment, leaving an opportunity for Rocky Jordan to represent Ohio State at the spot. Romero returned to the lineup when the Buckeyes hosted Pittsburgh at the Covelli Center on Dec. 12, 2021, and defeated Hunter Kernan 26-8 in a technical fall.

Romero pinned Michigan State’s Marty Larkin in his next match before losing to then-No. 2 Myles Amine of Michigan 3-1 in sudden victory and defeating then-No. 18 Abe Assad of Iowa with that same score in sudden victory a week later. Romero left the starting lineup a second time when the Buckeyes faced top-ranked Penn State on Feb. 4. He didn’t return to the team until Senior Day, where he pinned

Indiana's Sean Grim at 2:25.

Perhaps Romero's defining moment this season was his individual title at the Las Vegas Cliff Keen Invitational in December 2021. He ran the gauntlet by defeating Max Major (Michigan) by technical fall and then-No. 18 Darrien Roberts (Oklahoma), then-No. 11 Tate Samuelson (Wyoming) and then-No. 15 Taylor Venz (Nebraska) by decisions to win the 184-pound division.

"For Romero to wrestle at 184 has been a dream for him," Ryan said. "We anticipated having Kharchla, Smith and Romero hold down 165, 174 and 184 for us, and they have done an amazing job for our team. They're all really committed. They were all really big recruits who have put themselves in the right positions to win."