

2025 NCAA Wrestling Championship

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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
Wells Fargo Center

Coach Cael Sanderson

Finals Media Conference

CAEL SANDERSON: Just really happy for our team, proud of them. They went out here and really competed hard this weekend against, obviously, great competition. All 10 guys gave a great effort. Super proud of them. Happy for them.

Q. Can you just maybe put into words what this season has been like for you guys, now finishing off with another scoring record, 10 All-Americans, only the second time in NCAA history?

CAEL SANDERSON: Yeah, it's been a great year. Just a lot of fun people to work with. Obviously the team, our staff, just from top to bottom. I mean, we're just constantly kind of thinking ahead and just everything's preparation for the next thing. So we don't really kind of stop and reflect a whole lot. Obviously we're learning as we go and we'll continue to do that. That's the name of the game.

But, yeah, this was a really fun year with some new faces, like a Luke Lilledahl and a freshman, Barr. And then you've got a guy like Carter, who wins his fifth national title. All the way up and down the lineup everyone gave a great effort. And it was a lot of fun.

Obviously our coaching staff, Coach Cody and Coach Casey, and Nick Lee was a great addition this year. With Cody and Casey, I just try to stay out of their way and let them do their thing. They're the best coaches in the world. It's been a lot of fun to work with them.

Q. Do you see that takedown coming with Carter? Sort of do you know it was going to happen at some point?

CAEL SANDERSON: It's kind of what he does. He's such a competitor. I think you think, hey, he's won four, he's going to automatically win five. But I don't think he -- as soon as they knew there was that COVID year, he probably heard about that every day, where someone is, like, you can be the first five-time NCAA champion. And he's, let me win my second first and then my third, or



wherever that came along.

So that was a heck of a feat. That's really special. It takes a lot of mental toughness and focus. Super happy with him.

But shocked. You've got two of the best wrestlers in the country, first match-up, which is kind of weird. That was a great match-up. And that reshot Carter hit, that's as good as it gets.

Q. You alluded to it, people would have expected Carter's match to be the last instead of first. Do you feel that that is a sign that wrestling isn't being marketed the way it should be because a lot of people have expressed that they feel that way?

CAEL SANDERSON: Yeah, it's not a big deal. I mean it's you know when we told Carter, he was like, oh, really. It's not a big deal. You know whatever it is.

Usually events build up to the big match. But it doesn't matter. Whatever. We just show up.

And Carter shows up every day. That's why he -- and you see him compete all year long for five years. He competes every match and whenever, wherever. So it's pretty special. That's how you do what he just did.

But we're not worried about those kinds of things, really. It's not a big deal.

Q. How much of yourself do you see in Carter?

CAEL SANDERSON: Well, he's a competitor. I mean, there's certain things where you hate to lose so much that you will do whatever it takes -- diet, training, anything within the rules, of course.

Most people don't have that. He does. He's a competitor. He puts the time in and he does what he thinks he needs to do to be ready mentally and physically. And then he goes out there and he competes hard every time. I mean, every time he competes he's giving a great effort.

Q. If I could follow up, when did you realize you had that in Carter? Was that right out of the bat? Was that after his first season?

CAEL SANDERSON: I think he continued to get better. He's very coachable. His technique improved over time, which you don't see that a lot. Obviously if you follow wrestling, I mean -- and everything kind of cycles and goes in peaks and valleys and waves -- he was consistently working to get better all the time, which is obviously what it takes.

Q. As any tournament here, you hit a lot of highs. There's also a few unexpected loss, things like that. How difficult is it to keep it sort of even keeled when those kinds of things happen?

CAEL SANDERSON: It's tough. I mean, your heart's with each individual. I mean, you look at them. We spent so much time with these guys. You want to see them happy and reaching their goals.

And in a sport like this, any sport, you're talking one second here, one second there was the difference. So, yeah, some tough losses but everybody kind of rebounded well.

Even coming into the tournament, Greg hurt his knee last week in practice. We weren't even sure if he was going to be able to wrestle. First match we weren't sure if he was -- he just got tough for the team, went out there and made the semifinals.

Josh Barr, the same thing. We didn't know how he was going to wrestle the first match. We were hoping that he could compete. Then he makes it to the Finals as a freshman with a gutsy performance. Obviously really impressive there. And just up and down the lineup.

Luke Lillidahl, getting better every match. He's a pleasure to have on the team. Davis had a great tournament. Beau Bartlett wrestled great. A couple seconds away from being in the finals. That's life. That's sports. Van Ness wrestled great.

Kasak, just a scramble here, a couple seconds away from moving on. That's how it goes. And Mitchell winning the nationals. Obviously Levi Haines, a takedown away from getting in there, finishing third.

Guys finishing third, there's a lot of honor in that. That's a really big deal, something that obviously we really value them kind of battling back as a team.

Then you saw Carter and Barr and Greg I already talked

about. Great team effort.

Just super proud of them and happy for them. We're excited to get back to work. It's all a process. We just keep getting better as coaches. We've got to take our own medicine and figure out how we can do things better.

Q. With all the success you've had, this team, in particular, is there a few the things that maybe stand out? What makes this special, this version? Is it the 10 All-Americans? Is it Carter? Is it the points record? Is there something that maybe makes it special, or maybe your you're most proud of or maybe that was the hardest?

CAEL SANDERSON: I'll have to reflect on that. It was just a lot of fun. It was a great team. Just 10 quality tough, 10 All-Americans is super hard to do.

You have guys coming in here with injuries. And obviously if everybody's talking about the expectations and this is the point record or whatever it is, we don't talk about that stuff. But kids live on their phones. So they're seeing it and hearing it all the time.

It's hard. Being expected to do something and do it is probably the toughest thing in sports, right? But that also makes it a fun challenge.

Just a great team. All of our teams, we feel they're special. And we're excited for next year, too. We just keep getting better.

Q. When you won a title here the last time, the athletic world was different -- no NIL, transfer portal. As you talk about getting back to work, things like that, what do the next weeks, months look like for you now compared to back then?

CAEL SANDERSON: It doesn't really change for us. Our coaching staff will be in the room on Monday and we're working, the way everything's set up. We love it. We just love what we do and we love the sport.

Yeah, everything's changed a lot. But our values haven't changed. What we focus on as coaches and what we offer and bring to the table, that's not going to change.

As everything else changes, and maybe it's hard. But it's not hard for us because we know what's most important to us and what is the most important thing at the end of the day for us. That's just take care of our guys and help them be happy and reach their goals.

Q. There's been a lot of dynasties, not just in wrestling

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but for all sports. In wrestling specifically, Iowa, Oklahoma State have had runs. You're on a run now. What's your feeling just on dynasties in general? Do you feel it's good, bad, neutral for the sport when one team is just so dominant for so many years?

CAEL SANDERSON: I just know what my job is. My job's to put together the best staff we can at Penn State and recruit the student-athletes that fit the character and the focus and the mold that we're looking for, and just be the absolute best we can be.

If we do that, we're going to continue to be successful. But that's what I'm focused on. Anything else, it's just not something we think about.

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