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Mocco pinned name on Hodge Trophy

By Bryan Van Kley, W.I.N. Publisher

Oklahoma State's Steve Mocco finished a perfect 37-0 season at the NCAA Championships in St. Louis, Mo. with his second national title. The Cowboy junior rolled up 17 pins this year, an incredible 16 of them in the first period.

Because of that absolute domination of the heavyweight class, Mocco was selected the 2005 Dan Hodge Trophy winner by the International Wrestling Institute and Museum and W.I.N. Magazine. The Hodge Trophy is given annually to the sport's top collegiate wrestler. A number of criteria are used with a heavy emphasis put on pinning and domination.

"It's really a great honor to receive this award," Mocco said. "I grew up hearing stories, almost fairy tales about (Dan Hodge). I've been at little kids tournaments and seen him crush apples with his hands."

Mocco has been the one who has been a crushing force in Division I wrestling this year. In addition to his 17 pins, the first-year transfer from the University of Iowa also had three technical falls and seven major decisions. Two reversals were the only offensive points he gave up all year.

"He is an impressive young man," OSU coach John Smith said when told that Mocco won wrestling's version of the Heisman Trophy. "He's looking for perfection. That could be a good thing for some people and a bad thing for others. For him, it's a good thing because there's always something he's left on the mat."

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An amazing 13 of Mocco's 17 pins came in the first 90 seconds of the matches. Mocco said his pursuit of perfection and pins keep him hungry in his training.

"There's always room for improvement but you want to strive for perfection. For me, it helps me to train harder. When you start getting satisfied it will affect you in the room. I like to stay hungry," he said. "I get jacked up before a match and my goal is to pin. There's nothing more dominant than when you see someone get a pin. The (wrestler) just comes up with power (after a pin). To be a pinner, you're just always dangerous."

Mocco said his other goal is to dominate every guy who takes the mat against him and he takes pride in his physical style.

"I wrestle as hard as I can and I try to make him cringe if has to wrestle me again," the Cowboy said. Smith added that Mocco has that attitude in the practice room too, which presents an interesting problem.

"I really enjoy coaching Steve but he's not easy to coach. He doesn't feel sorry for you or sugarcoat anything. It's hard for us to keep (workout partners) in front of him," Smith said.

The Cowboy head man said his heavyweight could have gotten six to eight more pins had officials not gotten "greedy" when calling his patented "hammer lock" from the top position potentially dangerous at various times throughout the year.

The other Dan Hodge Trophy finalist was West Virginia's Greg Jones. The three-time national champion had very little trouble with the nation's top 184-pounders this year. Jones turned in outstanding numbers, racking up an impressive 25-0 record, with only seven opponents keeping the match under eight points.

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But, the deciding factor in Mocco getting the award over Jones was pins. Jones only had five pins during his senior campaign, 12 less than Mocco. Hodge was known as one of the most prolific pinners of all time, winning three NCAA titles (1955-1957) for the University of Oklahoma.

Hodge had 36 pins in 46 collegiate matches, the highest ever collegiate career pinning percentage (.782). He pinned 15 of 16 opponents his senior year and at one point flattened 18 straight opponents, including all foes in the Big Seven tournament, the NCAAs, AAU Nationals and the Greco Nationals. Hodge also was never taken down in his three years as a Sooner.

Jones was quite dominant, both this year and throughout his Mountaineer career. In addition to his five falls this year, he also had five technical falls, seven majors and an injury default. As the NCAA's Outstanding Wrestler, Jones was only taken down twice this year and ten times in the last four years, while racking up over 400 takedowns.

Jones would have had more matches this year but he didn't enter the Navy Classic because he competed in the NWCA All-Star Meet in November. And he also didn't go to the Vegas Invite in early December because both of his grandfathers passed away in a span of four days the week prior to the event.

"I don't know how Greg has kept it together," WVU assistant Zeke Jones said.

As Smith looks ahead, he said Mocco is still in that transition stage after transferring from Iowa to Oklahoma State last summer. He added that most people don't know the internal pressure that Mocco put on himself after deciding to head to Stillwater after taking an Olympic red shirt for the 2003-2004 season.

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“Getting this national championship under his belt was a big relief for him. There was much more internal pressure there than most people realize,” Smith said.

Mocco, who carried a 4.0 GPA in his first semester in Stillwater, is the first wrestler ever to win both the Hodge Trophy and the Jr. Dan Hodge Trophy, given to the top high school wrestler in the country. He won the prep award in 2001. Smith said one of the reasons that Mocco has improved as a wrestler is because of some of the personal changes he has made off the mat.

“Some of the things he struggled with in the past improved,” Smith said. “I saw him give a lot to his teammates and not be so self-centered. It made it more fun for him and that makes you better. He’s still mean, don’t get me wrong. But there’s a side of him that allowed our team to grow.”

In the eleven-year history of the prestigious award, Mocco becomes just the first Oklahoma State wrestler to win it. Smith said the award is very special for him as a coach, too.

“There’s a little bit more to it for me because of the man it’s named after. Dan has been a good friend and has always been very supportive and encouraging to me,” Smith said of the legendary Sooner who ironically lives 20 miles from Stillwater.

Mocco is now refocusing for his senior season but still has his sites set on gunning for his ultimate goal.

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“My final goal is to be an Olympic gold medalist and to dominate on the highest circuit. It’s been that way since I was a little kid,” Mocco said. “Anything else is not good enough.”

The Dan Hodge Trophy will first be presented to Mocco, April 7, at the Oklahoma State wrestling banquet. The trophy will also be publicly presented at the halftime of a home OSU football game next fall.

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