

St. Tammany wrestler Sammy Jones on track toward Olympics

By Anne Lang

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What a summer it's been for Sammy Jones of Folsom. And his fall is looking pretty great, as well.

The Greco-Roman wrestler, 20, has helped elevate Louisiana's profile on the world wrestling stage, winning the University National championship in the 59-kilo weight class in May, followed by a bronze medal in that same class at the University World Championships in Hungary.

Although he lost in the quarterfinals of the 59-kilo Greco trials at the FILA Wrestling World Championships in June, the Greco coaching staff at USA Wrestling selected Jones to travel to Uzbekistan this week to serve as a training partner for two-time Olympian Spencer Mango, who will represent the U.S. in the 59-kilo Greco class on Sept. 13.

"This makes me excited for Sam's future," said Jon Orillion, Jones' coach during his home-schooled high school years. "For the governing body of USA Wrestling to choose him to go says a lot about his dedication, work ethic and ability."

That ability emerged early in Jones' life.

"I was rambunctious as a kid, so when I was eight, my dad enrolled me in wrestling to help burn off some of my energy," said Jones, now a junior at Northern Michigan University. "I wrestled with various clubs and traveled with USA Wrestling up until high school. After that, I stuck with home-schooling, even though I had coaches telling me I would fall behind by not being in a traditional school."

But instead of falling behind, Jones soared under the private tutelage of Orillion, making the trip to the coach's garage gym in Metairie every day.

"We'd work out together, cut weight, run, lift weights and wrestle," said the 5-foot-3 Jones. "It was a challenge for me to wrestle Jon (Orillion is 180 pounds to Jones' 130), but ultimately it helped me in matches because I learned how to lift or move bigger opponents."

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Sammy Jones, Greco wrestler from St. Tammany Parish

Soon, Jones was competing with consistent success at national tournaments all over the country, and even overseas. By the end of his senior year, Jones had traveled to countries like Bulgaria, Sweden and Brazil, where he often won or placed high against foreign opponents.

However, as graduation approached and Jones was contemplating his invitation to train in Greco at the elite U.S. Olympic Training Center on the campus of NMU, he bailed.

"I'd pretty much burned out on the sport," Jones said. "Because of wrestling, I hadn't had much free time to do things like just hang out with friends. I wanted to relax, have fun and not feel any pressure to travel anywhere."

So Jones enrolled as a fulltime freshman at Southeastern Louisiana University, where he shared an apartment with some friends and took a job at the Popcorn Bistro in Covington to cover expenses.

For an entire year, he said, "I didn't set foot once on a wrestling mat."

But while Jones gained independence from the experience, it wasn't long before he began missing the wrestling world.

"I discovered that being an average kid maybe wasn't so great after all," Jones said. "I started missing being pushed, and being around other motivated people with big goals."

His longtime friend Isaiah Verona had gone on to NMU-OTS, "and he would tell me all the time how great it was. I thought, 'He's doing so well. I really wish I was there, so I could see how well I might be doing, too.' "

Fortunately, NMU-OTS honored its original invitation, so Jones had some catching up to do during the summer before entering the program in the fall of 2013.

"At Southeastern, I worked out sometimes, but it was nothing like the training I do now for wrestling," Jones said. "I was definitely out of shape by the time I got to Northern Michigan."

In Marquette, Jones dove headfirst into training, and his innate athletic ability and renewed drive quickly restored him to nearly peak condition — the operative word being "nearly."

"At NMU-OTS, we work out twice a day every day, so I put on about 10 pounds of muscle almost immediately," Jones recalled of his sophomore year. "I had to lose about 16 pounds to get down to my weight class."

"I was entering a very elite program, and I felt I had to prove that I belong there. So I trained extra hard and did overtime to catch up. That extra effort became a habit that I continued throughout my first year up there, which really helped me not just to catch up but to pass some people as well."

This semester, Jones is carrying 12 credits in his accounting major at NMU, which grants in-state tuition to OTS athletes. Jones's expenses (both academic and athletic) are covered by scholarship funds and a sponsorship by USA Wrestling President Jim Ravannack.

That's a welcome relief for his parents, Charlie and Theresa, who bankrolled all of their son's precollege wrestling activities, including overseas travel. The third-born of four children, Jones has a great appreciation for his parents' sacrifices and support through the years — including their insistence that he home-school from kindergarten to 12th grade.

"Looking back, I wouldn't change anything about being home-schooled," Jones said. "My mom invested a tremendous amount of time in me with my schoolwork, and I had flexible hours for training and traveling."

But for now, Jones is only looking ahead — to a future he hopes will add more national titles to his résumé, and maybe some world titles, too, as he sets his sights on the next Olympics.

He's definitely not lacking for people in his corner.

"Sammy goes out to the mat to win," said his NMU-OTS coach Rob Hermann. "He's only been with our program for a year, yet he's already won the University National championship and a medal at the University Worlds. He's athletic, hard-working and fast for the sport, with agility, strength and ability."

And Jones' chances for the 2016 Olympics?

"It can happen, because he's in the right atmosphere, and he's doing the right thing by going overseas (to Worlds) and training with Mango," Hermann said. "He'll be helping Mango in trying to medal, but at the same time, he'll be trying to get better himself."

Orillion, who's now the wrestling coach at Rummel High School, said he was "ecstatic" when his former protégé won the bronze medal at the University Worlds.

"Louisiana is not a huge wrestling state," Orillion said. "Sam and I traveled around for years hearing negative things about the wrestlers from our state. But now, with the wrestlers I coach, I can point to Sam's accomplishments and say: 'You see? Guys from Louisiana can compete and succeed at world level.' "