



New Mexico Activities Association Student Spotlight

Lopez Drives for Success in Life, Not just Wrestling

By Tyler Dunkel, Sports Information Director, NMAA

To be a champion takes drive, dedication and hard work but to be a champion in all aspects of life takes a special something that Isaac Lopez of Rio Grande High School has demonstrated his entire high school career.

Since the age of eight, Lopez has been involved in the Rio Grande wrestling program from junior wrestling to high school. Starting off at the 50-pound weight class in junior wrestling, Lopez has always been driven to do his best no matter if he won or he lost. This past season, Lopez capped off his high school wrestling career with his third straight championship at the 2016 New Mexico National Guard State Wrestling Championships. He reflected on his final season as a Raven as being both mentally and physically challenging.

“Overcoming all the mental and physical challenges that come with an entire wrestling season was hard. Winning isn’t everything to me but to know you were the better guy on that weekend was a great feeling. Physically beating up your body every day at practice or in matches was tough but mentally trying to cut weight is the hardest obstacle there is about wrestling. Trying to maintain your weight is exhausting both mentally and physically and on top of that still performing at an elite level and keeping up with your studies is challenging.”

He continued by saying his goals were never winning a state title but to do his best and continue to improve. “My goals were never to win state titles or be considered one of the best to ever wrestle in the state of New Mexico. My goal was to just get better and improve every day. I was more concerned with giving my best effort every time I stepped onto the mat. As long as I did that I knew I would be satisfied with any of the possible outcomes. I would say my main goal coming into high school was to earn a college scholarship.”

One of his biggest supporters during his junior wrestling and high school career was Rio Grande Head Coach Loren Vigil. Lopez said that Coach Loren, as he refers to him, was much more than just a coach to him. “Coach Loren has been much more than just a coach. Because wrestling season for me has never really stopped I have spent a lot of time with him. We have travelled the entire country together to different wrestling tournaments. He really became a mentor and a second father to me and for that, I’m very grateful.”

To have your name in the record books as a three-time state wrestling champion is a special accomplishment but Lopez said that his state title win during his sophomore season means the most because of the obstacles he faced during the year. “I think the title I won my sophomore season means more to me than any of them. I started off that year wrestling at 115 pounds. Two weeks into the season I broke my elbow. We thought my wrestling season was over because the healing process was about six to eight weeks. I wanted to wrestle in the Joe Vivian that year but my parents did not let me. So I sat out until the Metro Tournament and going into the tournament I wasn’t sure if I was ready physically but I wanted to prove to everyone that I could still finish on top. To win state after the year I had with the injury really meant a lot.”



Lopez's journey to three state titles took a very different path than most high school wrestlers. As a sophomore, he wrestled at 126 pounds, then as a junior at 138 pounds but finished his career in the 182-pound weight class, nearly a 60-pound jump from his sophomore campaign to this senior season. He explained how he made the dramatic jump.

"My whole mindset when it came to jumping weight classes was that I really wanted to prove something to myself. My coaches and my parents were a little hesitant to allow me to do that but I told Coach Loren that I wanted to make my final run at a third title special. During the off-season I wrestled around 160 but as time went on I got a little taller and put on more weight and I was at 175. I wrestled my first few tournaments of the year at 182 and I lost to a wrestler from Belen. At that point, I had to make a decision to either cut the weight back to 170 or continue to wrestle at 182 and try and get the kid from Belen. After speaking with Coach Loren, we decided to do what was best for the team and what was best for the team was that I wrestling at 182. Winning as a team meant more to me than anything, so that's what I did."

His parents, Anthony and Elaine Lopez, were a little concerned at first about Isaac putting on that much weight but as Elaine commented, she was glad he was adding the weight rather than trying to cut the weight. "I think the weight gain happened naturally. When he was a freshman he was really little and by the time summer of his senior came around you could tell he was starting to stretch out and gaining the weight wasn't going to be a big issue. Personally, I was glad to see him trying to gain weight, rather than trying to cut the weight. He trained a lot to get to that point. I didn't think he would gain that much weight but I think he did it the right way."

In 2016-17, Lopez will no longer be walking the halls of Rio Grande High School and hopes his legacy at Rio Grande reflects more about the person he was off the mat, rather than the person he was on the mat. "I hope people really remember me more for the person I was off the mat, rather than on the mat. I try to be a role model to a lot of people on the right way to do things, the right way to treat people and the right way to approach your academics. I feel a lot of people look up to me and I hope they remember that I was just as much of a champion off the mat as I was on the mat."

Elaine followed her son's statement by saying, "I hear a lot about his personality and how he always speaks his mind about something but how he is always very respectful to others. Even on the mat, he has always displayed good sportsmanship and has received several awards for those efforts. He works hard on his grades and he has made the right choices when it comes to friends. We are very proud of the young man he has become."

Lopez has always been proud to be a Raven. From the time he was a junior wrestler or a YAFL football player, the name on the front of the uniform has always been the same and that is something of which he is very proud. "To be a Rio Grande Raven has meant everything to me. I've been a Raven since the time I started playing sports. I was a Raven in junior wrestling and in YAFL football. Rio Grande has a great tradition. We are a big family. From the parents to the staff and the students we all support each other."

So what's Lopez' secret to his success on the mat? He offered some advice to younger athletes who have dreams of becoming successful wrestlers. "The best advice I could give younger wrestlers is to work hard because if you work hard and feel good about the effort you gave, regardless of winning or losing, you know that you gave everything you had and did your best to compete at your highest level. I've had my moments where I was down about losing but, like people say, 'The sun comes up the next day.' The other thing I would say is that you wrestle the guy in front of you, you don't wrestle his ranking. Whether you are a freshman and he is a senior or you are ranked No. 7 and he is ranked No. 1, you still have to go out there and wrestle."

One of the constants in his life has been his family support. Lopez agrees that the support his family has provided him has been a major piece of his success. "Without my family's support over the years, I wouldn't be where I am today. With all the hard work I've had to put in, they've had to put in just as much if not more. All the travelling and expenses and my grumpiness when I had to cut weight, they have been there every step of the way, supporting me. I feel as long as you have a good support system it motivates to do your best not only for yourself but for them too."

This spring, Lopez received a call that would change his life and fulfill a lifelong dream. He will attend Adams State University in the Fall of 2016 on a full-ride wrestling scholarship. Lopez said he felt happy and a little emotional after receiving the news. "When I first got the call from Adams State and they offered me a full-ride to college it was like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. You always heard people talk about going Division I but, to be honest, athletes are athletes. The coaches made me and my family very comfortable that I will be in good hands. I was a little emotional about it because I felt like I already accomplished something more than just three state titles. I know college coaches look at your ability to play the sport but they also look at your grades and the type of person you are and that was a good feeling to know that everything I've done and everything I am as a person and the choices I've made has paid off."

Elaine continued by saying, "It was a good day when we found out that Isaac was going to college on a full-ride. We have always

provided the financial support to all our kids that they needed and either way Isaac was going to get a college education, whether he was on a wrestling scholarship or not. We feel very fortunate for him to have this opportunity. Because he will be so close to home we will have the opportunity to see him compete at the college level.”

One might think that Isaac’s focus would be on finishing high school on a strong note academically, which it is, but following the wrestling season this year he had other ideas. The three-time state wrestling champion decided to try his hand at the school’s tennis and track and field teams. A state champion wrestler playing tennis, you might think is an odd pairing, but not for Lopez.

“I’ve done a little bit of everything during my high school career. I played baseball my freshman and sophomore years and football as a junior. But the more serious I got about wrestling I decided to stay focused on one sport that I thought was going to get me a scholarship. So as my senior year came around I realized this could be my last opportunity to do some other things so my best friend has been a member of the tennis team for four years and I told him if he went out for track and field with me I would go out for tennis. I’m not very good at tennis but I have enjoyed the experience so far.”

His mother, was shocked at the decision to play tennis but was supportive. “When he told me he was going to play tennis I said, ‘What?’ but if that’s what he wanted to do we were fine with it. With track, I worry about him throwing the javelin and shot put and the wear on his shoulder but as long as he can keep his grades up we are supportive.”

It’s obvious that Lopez loves sports, especially wrestling, but he also loves school. When talking about his academics you can tell that the 3.5 GPA student isn’t satisfied with being just an average student and it wasn’t until a conversation with a college coach at a wrestling tournament in Iowa that it really hit home just how important his grades were.

“I think I could be a better student. Even though, I carry a 3.5 GPA, I always want to do better. My parents have always placed an emphasis on keeping my grades up. They, along with Coach Loren, always told me that in order to wrestle I had to have good grades. I didn’t want to jeopardize that so I work really hard to be a good student. What really turned my focus on being a good student was a college coach I spoke with at a tournament in Iowa. He didn’t ask me one question about wrestling, all his questions were about school and that is when the light came on and I realized I need to really get serious about my studies.”

“Our message has always been that grades come first and if you don’t have the grades you can’t wrestle,” Elaine said. “His athletics will only take him so far in life. When he goes to Adams State it will all be on him because no one will be there to ask him if he got his schoolwork done or check his homework. It will all be on him. But I think we have geared him in the right direction.”

Lopez plans to attend Adams State University and graduate with a degree in Exercise Science before moving back to Albuquerque to attend PA School at the University of New Mexico. No matter where or what he ends up doing in life, Lopez will give his best effort to succeed.