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Two troubled teens earn respect on DHS team

By Gregory Moore

Herald Sports Writer

On any game day, high school student-athletes are keyed up and eager to play. But few area athletes are as eager to compete - or even practice - as Durango wrestlers Felipe Rubio and Juan Martinez.



DUSTIN BRADFORD / Special to the Herald

Durango Demon wrestler Juan Martinez, top, works for an advantage against Ross Melton, of Ignacio, during the 171-pound match of the Durango-Ignacio dual meet Tuesday at Durango High School. Martinez, a student-athlete at the DeNier Youth Services Center in Durango, has earned a spot on the DHS varsity despite having no previous wrestling experience.

the school.

That's because they have been placed in the Rite of Passage program for juvenile offenders. They spend their days - and nights and weekends - at the Robert E. DeNier Youth Service Center in a disciplined, structured environment designed to get troubled teenagers back on track. The center is a 4-year-old, state-run juvenile detention center at 720 Turner Drive in Bodo Industrial Park.

With good grades and good behavior, freshman Rubio, 14, and junior Martinez, 16, have earned the highest level of status afforded to participants in the Rite of

Both are members of this year's Demon wrestling program and are listed on the rolls of the Durango 9-R school system as full-time students. But they share little else with their teammates at DHS. Rubio, whose mother Melissa Rubio and stepfather Mike Martinez live in Ignacio, and Martinez, whose mother Annette Martinez and stepfather Gilberto Quezada live in Pagosa Springs, don't even share the halls of

Passage program, which means they have earned the opportunity to leave the facility on afternoons and during weekend competitions to be part of the DHS team.

By wrestling their way onto the Demon varsity in a scant three weeks, both boys - without any prior wrestling experience - have earned the respect of DHS coaches and teammates.

"For me, it's been a really great experience," Rubio said. "At first I thought (the Durango wrestlers) might not accept us, that they might be rude to us. But they shared stuff with us, showed us moves and helped us with our wrestling."

Said Martinez: "They welcomed us. The coaches are really dedicated to the kids, and I'm learning a lot. I went to a varsity meet in Pagosa on January 10th - my first ever - and I finished sixth."

Both boys feel lucky to have the chance to wrestle at DHS. Martinez paved the way earlier this school year by playing on the DHS varsity football team.

Their opportunity came when Troy Erickson came aboard in the fall as program director at DeNier. He quickly sought ways to get his best students outside the locked doors and into the world.

"I'm all for getting them involved, getting them back into the community," Erickson said Tuesday night as he joined the crowd in the DHS gym to watch the Demons take on Ignacio in a dual meet. "We need to expose these guys to the same elements they're going to be dealing with when they rejoin in the community."

Erickson arrived in Durango just after Derek Glover moved here in August from Ohio. On his second day in town, Glover answered a classified ad. He was hired on the spot to work as a coach and counselor at DeNier. A former high school wrestler with some coaching experience, Glover went to Erickson in the autumn

with plans of starting a club wrestling team, and Erickson gave him the green light.

"When I started the wrestling team, our budget was real tight," said Glover, who volunteers his time to accompany Rubio and Martinez to every DHS practice and meet, in addition to working a regular full-time schedule at DeNier.

"We started with four guys and a folded-up gymnastics mat," he said. "It was tough to put in any good training. It's so nice to be able to come (to DHS) and use some good equipment."

When the DeNier team came to DHS to take part in a preseason meet, Durango head wrestling coach Shaun Smith saw no reason why team members shouldn't join his program.

"It was Shaun's idea," said DHS Athletic Director Marc Cooper. "And once we looked at it, it was just a no-brainer. I mean, why not? They're already part of the school district, and we know how important athletics and activities are to kids in high school."

Erickson added: "DHS made the offer. We came to a meet here at the high school, and Shaun and Marc came up and said, You've got some talented kids, so why don't you bring them on over?"

Glover has become a de facto addition to the DHS coaching staff.

"They're tough kids, and they work hard in practice," Smith said at Tuesday's meet. "They've really only been with the team since Christmas, and they're already wrestling with the varsity."

Martinez is proud of his progress.

"Usually my sport is basketball, but when I heard about the wrestling team, I thought I might want to give it a try," he said. "I really like it. I don't know all the moves, but I'm going to get it down by the end of the season."

Against Ignacio, on a night when the Bobcats won nearly every match, both Rubio and Martinez wrestled well but were defeated. Both were also penalized for locking their hands in illegal holds - a sign of their inexperience.

At 171 pounds, Martinez went up against IHS senior Ross Melton, who has state tournament experience. Out-pointed by the wily Melton, Martinez still managed to give Melton all he could handle for a full three periods.

Rubio, wrestling at 130 pounds, found the experience a bit more surreal. When his bout was announced, he found himself facing Frank Valencia, one of his best friends from Ignacio.

"When I stepped out on the mat, I got a weird feeling," Rubio said. "At first I didn't want to wrestle him. But I had a great time doing it."

Rubio also went the distance with Valencia, refusing to give up even when the Ignacio wrestler seemed poised for a pin.

"I kept struggling with locking my hands," he said. "I lost, but that means I've got to train harder for next week."

Martinez, who is hoping for release from DeNier at a parole hearing in March, plans to play football and wrestle for Pagosa Springs in his senior year.

"(Wrestling) motivates us here, so we can stay doing it," he said. "We have to earn respect and trust so we can go off-site. I want to do well, show my teammates, and help them win. And it's something I can look forward to. It's helped me realize that it's never too late."

Reach Sports Writer Gregory Moore at gregory@durangoherald.com .