

The road to nationals">

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Lance Wolfsmith trains near Anderson Lake on Tuesday as he and his Wolfpak teammates prepare for Saturday's USA Triathlon Youth and Junior Elite National Championship in Colorado Springs, Colo. The Wolfpak is sending six boys to compete.
Photo by: Lora Schraft

"What are my goals?"

Two weeks spent training for the nation's biggest Junior Elite triathlon and a Wednesday morning filled with plyometrics, weight lifting and friendly team bantering boiled down to one question for Matthew Sosa.

For the first time all day, the Wolfpak's training center was silent. That is, until teammate Kyle Benton chimed in from across the room.

"Your goal should be to beat me," Benton said.

"I have beaten you," Sosa responded.

"Not last time. Last time, I smoked you."

"No you didn't. You finished like two spots ahead of me."

"Yeah, but you've been doing this for five years. I just started."

"Dude, whatever!"

The good-humored argument brought silence again, adding another coat of highlighter to the question that - three days before the USA Triathlon Youth Elite and Junior Elite National Championship - burned brightly in the minds of each Wolfpak member.

"We argue a lot," the coach's son, Lance Wolfsmith, said to no one in particular. "Our goal should be to not argue



Morgan Hill's Kyle Benton of team Wolfpak works out with a medicine ball Wednesday in preparation for this weekend.
Photo by: Lora Schraft

so much."

And there was laughter again.

You've heard how athletes try to stay loose before a big game. Well, this is how the 'pak triathletes do it. They marvel at a successful season in the USAT Junior Elite Cup Series and challenge each other - and themselves. On Thursday, six made the trip to Colorado Springs, Colo., where the National Championship starts at 8 a.m. Saturday in Memorial Park. Aside from Gilroy's Sosa, 16, and Morgan Hill's Benton, 18, and Wolfsmith, 16, the Junior Elite (ages 16-19) contingent includes Tyler Rodgers, 16, of Coto de Caza. Also for the 'pak, Kyle's brother Dustin Benton, 13, and Kyle Alexander, 12, will compete in the Youth and Youth Elite divisions (ages 13-15).



Gilroy's Matthew Sosa of team Wolfpak does a clean and press lift Wednesday.

Photo by: Lora Schraft

Although ranked fourth in the Junior Elite Cup Series standings and likely out of contention for the team title, the Wolfpak - complete with its new sponsor Rudy Project - is still hungry and not about to let its season end sourly.

"They're itching to get out there," Wolfpak coach Dave Wolfsmith said. "We're very confident that we'll do well. I'm proud our team is ranked as high as we are.

"The guys have shown great improvement. They were in track shape when they started the season. Now, they're in true triathlon shape and going against the top guys in the country. As a coach and fan, I'm excited to see them race."

Heading into the final leg of the three-event Cup Series, all eyes are on the closely fought individual championship, which will likely go to the winner of Saturday's race. Lance Wolfsmith has to be considered one of the favorites in the 50-man field, especially after his July 20 red-letter victory in the Oxnard Strawberry Fields Triathlon. Wolfsmith covered the 800-meter swim, five-kilometer bike ride and 20-kilometer run in an unofficial time of one hour, one minute, 47 seconds, besting Ben Steavenson of the USAT Junior Elite development team by almost a minute.

Steavenson, who's the top returning finisher from last year's nationals in Longmont, Colo., still holds a 150-140 lead over Wolfsmith in the point standings. They will face outside challenges from Kevin McDowell and Ben Kanute of Multisport Madness.

"The race is probably going to come down to those four guys - that's a safe bet," USAT Athletic Development Coordinator Steve Kelley said. "There are a few people that could surprise, but Steavenson, Wolfsmith, Kanute and McDowell have made the biggest statement this year. It can come down to any one of them. You never know what you're going to get."

Lance Wolfsmith still feels in control. He owned the fastest splits in the bike and run at Oxnard after shaking off a slow start in the open-water swim. Like his teammates, Wolfsmith spent the past two weeks shaving seconds off his times.

"I expect to win this," said Lance, who placed fourth in the Hy-Vee Triathlon - the opening Cup Series event - on June 21 in West Des Moines, Iowa. "(Steavenson), in my opinion, is the only one that can hold me off in the run. If he has a lead on me - if anyone has more than a minute lead on me going into the run - they have a chance of beating me. Ben is the real threat."

Saturday's race will leave no doubt who the top Junior Elite in the nation is, according to Dave Wolfsmith.

"Our guys haven't raced in the best triathlon shape yet this season," he said. "People haven't seen what Lance can do. Nationals is going to be the real test."

It's the kind of opportunity Lance Wolfsmith has been looking forward to since 2006. That was the year he stormed onto the national scene after winning the Youth Elite individual title. Lance followed that with a disappointing debut season as a Junior Elite.

"There was a lot of hype about me," Lance recalled. "Everyone knew I had talent, but it really set me up bad for the next level. I almost feel bad when I see guys doing well early and getting called 'prodigies.' Ninety percent of the time, it doesn't work out that way.

"I have a lot to prove still. My only disappointment this weekend would be to take second. I don't want to lose this race."

Lance's actual goal is to take first, and his teammates' goal is to keep up with him. Kyle Benton said, "that would be the greatest thing ever."

"We want to at least go in and come out of the water with Lance and keep up with him on the bike," he added. "I can't run as fast as him, but I know I can swim as fast. I definitely want to make the top 10."

The top 10 non-independent finishers score Cup Series points for themselves and their team. The top 20 finishers collect individual points.

Benton and Sosa hoped to score big in each triathlon this summer but have suffered through nagging strings of bad luck. Benton withdrew from the Hy-Vee because of sickness and, like Sosa, had to battle through cramps two weeks ago.

"I didn't do well at all at Strawberry Fields," said Sosa, who placed 17th at Oxnard and 19th at Des Moines. "You can't do anything about cramps. You just hope they go away.

"I was in great shape but I didn't hydrate well."

Benton said a "lack of warmup" hampered him at Strawberry Fields, where he placed 13th. He and the rest of the Wolfpak will be better prepared Saturday.

"We're going to be focusing and hydrating once we get there," Dave Wolfsmith said. "They're going to be off their feet as much as they can. They're going to be drinking on the plane, when they get off the plane - all the time. We definitely have to plan for everything."

That includes the biggest obstacle of all in Colorado: elevation. With its altitude of almost 5,000 feet, Longmont demands weeks of acclimation. The Wolfpak has three days.

"At least everyone's going to have to deal with it," Kyle Benton joked.

Dave Wolfsmith views any X-factor as an advantage for his team. He hopes the Memorial Park course isn't as flat as USAT officials have reported.

"Our guys have the biggest edge if there's hills, especially Lance," he said. "Even if there's a little incline in the road, there's an advantage. Our guys are strong - not that their guys aren't strong. But we're stronger."

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