

Alton's Alejandro Lopez's determination in wrestling pays with McKendree University scholarship

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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GODFREY – Although he did have a couple of years of experience as a younger child, **Alejandro Lopez** really didn't take up wrestling until he first arrived as a freshman at **Alton High School** in the fall of 2012.

Most top wrestlers often begin wrestling in their grade-school days thanks to the many wrestling clubs that exist throughout the area, learning the basic skills and moves of the sport.

Thanks to continuous hard work and determination, however, Lopez made himself one of the Redbirds' top wrestlers, achieving his goal this past season of reaching the IHSA individual state wrestling tournament, representing the Redbirds at 145 pounds.

Lopez was rewarded for all the work he put it into the wrestling room at AHS as he signed a letter of intent to attend **McKendree University in Lebanon** beginning this fall; the Bearcats are today an NCAA Division II program that is a member of the Great Lakes Valley Conference.

“It's amazing,” Lopez said. “Two years ago, I had a talk with my mom about college, and I had belief I'd wrestle in college. I'm pretty sure I flat-out said, 'there's no way I'll make it in college. I'm just not good enough', and now, to be accepted to a Division II college that had interest, it's just amazing. I'm super-excited to be able to move on with wrestling, to keep going.”

Lopez actually began wrestling when he was in third grade and wrestled through fourth grade, then stopped wrestling out of family concerns. “Throughout middle school, I wanted to keep with a sport,” Lopez said. “I tried to persuade (Lopez's mother) to let me wrestle, and she kept saying, 'no'. Finally, when I got to high school, she agreed to let me do a high school sport. I just re-picked up on wrestling.”

When Lopez was younger, like many youths, he watched the professional sports-entertainment version of wrestling. “When I was younger, I watched (World Wrestling Entertainment) and all the fake stuff, and thought, 'oh wow, I get to do that',” Lopez said. “Then I realized, no, it's not (like) that; I found that it (wrestling) was fun.

“I'm a big fan of individual sports; I like that fact that when I go out on the mat, it's just me, I don't have to rely on someone else.”

“I know he (Lopez) was considering it (wrestling in college),” said **Redbird coach Eric Roberson**. “I think McKendree's a real good choice for him; it's a good fit for Alejandro. It's a Division II school and he's so strong academically. He had a (strong score on the ACT test); I think McKendree's going to get a good student and a really good wrestler.

“He can develop his skills there and I think that's the right level for him. He's a great kid. To see him go on to college and take his skills to the next level; he only came out his freshman year and he wasn't even varsity. He had to work his way through the system and work his way up.

“We're all so proud of him, the coaching staff's proud of him. That's what you build your program on. He's kind of a model as to what you want your program to look like. He

didn't come in as a superstar; he worked his way through and has a good work ethic. He didn't get that state medal he wanted, but he achieved a goal he had for a long time, that was to get to the state tournament.”

Wrestling itself is a difficult sport to begin with. “You can't throw yourself out there and expect to succeed right away,” Roberson said. “There's more skill than there is athletic ability, and he was able to develop that skill pretty quickly. Wrestling taught him some discipline, but he was pretty self-disciplined when he came in.

“He was able to be pretty successful in all areas of the sport and he did an outstanding job for us.”

Lopez will be going into the pre-engineering program at McKendree and plans to transfer either to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana or to Missouri S&T University in Rolla after three years with the goal of getting into mechanical engineering.