

Love of wrestling is part of what these twins share



By Kip Carlson | Photo by Hannah O'Leary

People hear the word “twins” and most often think of a pair of genetic carbon copies. Therefore, it comes as a bit of a surprise to see Grant and Hunter Willits several weight classes apart on the Beaver wrestling roster.

The two like to surprise folks with their status as decidedly nonidentical twins.

“They don’t believe us,” said Grant, a 5-foot-7, 133-pounder. “I always have to bring in someone else and say, ‘Come on, tell these guys that we really are twins.’” Added Hunter, a 5-10, 157-pounder, “We have to show our IDs sometimes just to prove it.”

It will be even harder to convince some folks now with a look at the Beaver wrestling roster, as their class standing will be different along with their weights.

Hunter is heading into his sophomore season. Last winter he qualified for the NCAA championships, going 18-16 and finishing second in the Pac-10 at 157 pounds. He earned the team’s Joe Wells Award, given to the Beaver making the greatest impact on the team.

Grant is still listed as a freshman after redshirting last season. He went 6-4 in open tournaments, wrestling at 141 pounds.

And, as OSU head coach Jim Zalesky noted, “Grant’s a more outgoing guy, he talks a lot more. Hunter is probably the more quiet of the two.”

They also present slightly different approaches on the mat. The two describe

OSU’s wrestling twins Grant (left) and Hunter Willits share a powerful competitive streak.

Grant as a little more “funky” while Hunter leans toward a basic style.

There are plenty of twin-like similarities, though, for the brothers from Pueblo County High School in Colorado.

“I think the biggest thing is just competitiveness,” Zalesky said. “The biggest thing with twins is, they’re used to competing. They’re a lot more competitive than a lot of guys are. They’ve competed their whole lives.”

And, in addition to both being wrestlers and choosing Oregon State, each of the brothers is headed for a degree in mechanical engineering. Their father, Rick Willits — an NAIA national wrestling champion — taught high school engineering courses and their older brother, Keenan, is a mechanical engineer.

“Growing up, we’ve always been around that kind of stuff,” Hunter said. “And my dad does sculptures and stuff, so he’s constructing and building stuff, doing bronze sculpture.

“That’s always intrigued me a bit. I took some classes in high school and I just really enjoyed it. I didn’t see myself doing anything else. If I had to switch to something else I don’t know what I would do.”

Added Grant: “We grew up around it. I always liked building stuff since I was little, trying to use your mind to come up with something new or be strategic about tackling a problem ... I know once I graduate there are so many options I can do with my major. It’s kind of cool.”

The two, both National Honor Society members in high school, have found it challenging to mix the demands of their major with their commitment to wrestling.

“It’s hard,” Hunter said. “All our friends are like, ‘I don’t have any homework this weekend, I’m going to go do something fun.’ You just have to stay focused. Tutors are a key thing for getting through classes. And managing our time and getting our homework done as much as we can on time. Because you want to do the best you can in wrestling, but it’s hard to be the best wrestler you could possibly be with trying to handle this engineering stuff.”

Grant also finds it a bit frustrating trying to excel as a student and as a wrestler. But, he said, the ultimate goal of being at Oregon State is to earn his degree.

“I know I’m going to use my degree at the end of my four or five years or whatever I’m here for,” Grant said. “So I know it’s the most important, but in my heart I’d like to focus on just wrestling. It’s just hard.”

OSU’s coaches work to accommodate the twins’ academic programs. When it came time to take a required lab offered only at the same time as wrestling practice, coaches made time to work out with the brothers during other hours.

The ability to balance rigorous academics with highly competitive wrestling was part of why the twins ended up at Oregon State. Another was Corvallis’ college-town atmosphere.

“I just saw myself living here for the next five years,” Hunter said. “I saw some campuses that are in big cities and at first it was like, ‘Man, this is cool,’ because I’m not from a big city, so this is cool, I think I’d like this.

“Then I came here, and it was like, I like the more laid-back, relaxing feel Corvallis has. It was, ‘This is more me, I want to be at a place like this.’”

The coaching staff was also part of their decision. Hunter pointed to Zalesky’s three national titles as a college wrestler and the three NCAA championship teams he coached at Iowa as selling points.

“So just having those, it all just felt right,” Hunter said.

The twins were a package deal when it came to recruiting. For a time, they considered what might happen if each were set on a different school, but, by the time colleges came calling, the brothers knew they’d be going to the same place.

That was fine with Zalesky, who prefers getting both brothers in situations like this.

“They’re just used to each other, used to being around each other, used to training together,” Zalesky said. “It’s hard to separate twins. I’ve been around a lot of them, and it’s hard to separate them. I think a lot (of coaches) try to recruit one or the other; my approach is, I wanted the both of them.”

Now the OSU coach is anticipating his nonidentical twins on the mat. “They’re fun to watch wrestle. I like the way they wrestle and I’m looking forward to having them in the lineup.” 🍌