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FIGHTING ILLINI WRESTLING

For Barone, Lessons Learned As Illini Will Carry Over

By Matt Daniels

The News-Gazette

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. - **Jim Heffernan** described **Eric Barone** in a pretty apt way.

"If there's something to do," the Illinois wrestling coach said of his fifth-year senior, "he's not going to procrastinate."

Case in point: Barone's future job prospects. The Crystal Lake native earned his bachelor's degree in accounting last May from Illinois.

By August, he had a job lined up at Deloitte, where he will work in the financial company's tax division. Even with one season of eligibility remaining to wrestle with the Illini before the start of the 2019-2020 season.

"My parents were definitely happy that I had a job before starting my last year of school," Barone said with a laugh of the job he's planning on starting in July. "It was a relief, too."

Barone has extra time on his hands, now, to prep for his entry into the business world after his final season wrestling at Illinois was cut short. Barone was one of three seniors at Illinois, along with **Travis Piotrowski** and **Joey Gunther**, who had qualified for the NCAA Championships before the event in Minneapolis - scheduled for last week - was canceled on March 12 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"My initial reaction was shock," Barone said. "But I definitely felt like I knew it was coming because the night before the NCAA announced it, the NBA suspended its season. It was still weird because it all happened so fast. I went from wrestling at the Big Ten tournament and less than a week later, I was traveling home."

Barone finished his senior season with a 15-13 record at 157 pounds, a slight dip from the 20-16 mark he posted during the 2018-19 season. But the three-time NCAA qualifier was just starting to wrestle his best at the most critical part of the season.

"The unfortunate thing for him is he's really turned it on here at the end of the year, beating two top guys at the Big Ten meet," Heffernan said. "He hadn't had a great year until the Big Ten tournament, but he was really figuring it out late in the season."

Barone pointed to a meeting with Heffernan and assistant coach **Mike Poeta** after Barone suffered a loss during a home match against Northwestern on Feb. 2 as a turning point.

"I sat down with Poeta and talked to him," Barone said. "I said, 'I don't know what's going on. I'm living

my life right. I'm going to class. I'm managing my weight.' Then, Heff stuck his head in and said, 'We think the effort is there, but you need to have your effort directed towards something. You try really hard, but you don't know what you're trying hard for.' That made it easier, and I started seeing success."

Barone won his final four matches in the regular season and then placed fourth at the Big Ten meet, the top showing by an Illini at the event.

A superb way to cap his career at Illinois, a place he never thought he'd wrestle at until late in his high school career at Crystal Lake South.

Northern Iowa and Northern Illinois had shown interest in Barone, but once Illinois did, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion he would end up wrestling with the Illini.

"I ended up having a pretty good state tournament my junior year," Barone said of his fifth-place finish at 145 pounds during the Class 3A meet in 2014. "After that tournament, Heff reached out to me and said he was interested. That's when it first hit me of, 'Whoa, that's something I could actually do.' I always knew that growing up and being an athlete in Illinois, I would love to go to the U of I. The second Heff reached out to me, I definitely knew I was going to Illinois."

School played a factor, too, for Barone, who ended up compiling a 3.44 grade-point average in his undergraduate years. But connections in wrestling also steered him to his future career path.

Barone credits former Illini wrestler Matt Nora, a redshirt senior when Barone joined the Illinois roster, for his influence.

"He was doing the same thing as I am now," said Barone, who had an internship last summer with Deloitte by working in their tax division. "I like to be organized and I like when I know why things are working. In accounting, that's what happens. Once I started to figure out that I could do that for a job, it just kind of made sense to me."

While Barone's wrestling career is finished, he said he'll look back fondly on the time he spent at Illinois on the mat and the lessons he learned from the sport in his new job. One that, given his personality and nature, he can't wait to get started.

"Wrestling will transfer over, in general, in my life and in my future job just because of the hard work and knowing that it might take a couple times to get something right," Barone said. "In wrestling, you might not win the first or second time, but you can always learn what was going wrong. It's the same way in life. Even if you fail in something, you can always learn."

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