

The **Bamberg-Ehrhardt wrestling** team has been ranked atop the state Class 2A rankings all season long.

So opposing teams have seen the Red Raiders coming and have expected a huge challenge on the mat.

"We've been ranked No. 1 bell to bell this season," B-E head coach Jake Stewart said. "In fact, we started the season ranked No. 1 in four of last seven seasons."

So it's no surprise that B-E will be **wrestling** for its fourth state title in eight years on Saturday at 11 a.m. at Airport High School in Columbia, taking on the other Class 2A top seed from **Liberty** High School. The Red Devils advanced out of the Upper State bracket on Wednesday by squeaking by Andrew Jackson in a 35-30 match.

The Red Raiders lost the state title match to Cheraw a year ago and have no plans to see the state title go back to the Upstate again.

"We knew we had a strong freshman class coming up and three returning state individual champions," Stewart said. "But at the same time, they never cease to amaze me, and we wrestle better than I think we are nearly every match.

"You can look at the scores; they have surprised me with how we have dominated in the playoffs."

The Red Raiders took down Abbeville by a 66-12 score in the state quarterfinals before Wednesday's 64-18 home state semifinal win against Marion.

Bamberg-Ehrhardt is 41-9 this season, having taken on out-of-state foes and as much in-state competition as possible.

"We've had a lot of matches and wrestled in a lot of places," Stewart said. "We put our kids in a lot of different situations to see how they react and how they compete.

"At this point, the state championship is really just another match, and they see it like that. The freshmen keep talking about a four-peat of state titles. It's too early for that, but I do believe they are willing to put in the work it will take to win every year."

Of course, the challenge with having a top-notch **wrestling** program in an athletic program known mostly for football and baseball is scheduling between the other two sports.

"I schedule **wrestling** starting later because of football, knowing that football will be in the playoffs for a while, but also knowing that winning mentality comes with the football players when they transition for **wrestling**," Stewart said. "That's just Bamberg, in general. We expect to win.

"We had a down season with a 28-10 record the year after we won the last state title in **wrestling**. The guys are hungry for this."

The Red Raiders know the Red Devils from **Liberty** will be hungry for a title too.

"**Liberty** is a well-coached program that has been in the finals five of the last six years," Stewart said. "They expected to be here just as much as we did.

"I just know our boys are motivated and ready for Saturday. Some of the Upstate people have picked **Liberty** to beat us by 15. We don't pay much attention to it."

The Red Raiders entered this month with five freshmen ranked No. 6 or higher in their weight classes in the

state Class 2A-1A rankings for the season. That youth has mixed in well with three seniors who are each ranked No. 1 in their weight classes -- De'Juan Sease (285-pound class), James Gainyard (170-pound class) and Kohl Gagum (182-pound class) -- and two highly ranked juniors -- KeSean Brown, No. 1 in 195-pound class, and Quinton Blake, No.2 in 128-pound class.

"Each one of the seniors gives me something different on the team," Stewart said. "De'Juan is the steady influence, James is excited and wants to get in and mix it up, while Kohl is like the daddy of the bunch.

"They take time in the room to teach the kids little things that will help them improve on the mat. That works well here, with the tradition of things being regimented with football and baseball. It's different here compared to other places I have been. People in Bamberg like to win and are willing to do what it takes to win. **Wrestling** has been at **Bamberg-Ehrhardt** for 25 years now. We are just trying to continue the success that has already been here."

It was five years ago that B-E started the middle school **wrestling** program. All three seniors are former middle school state champions.

Now, as a team, they are focused on bringing home another varsity state title on Saturday.

The Red Raiders last won the trophy in 2011 and 2012 (in Class A) before winning again in 2013 (Class 2A/1A).