

WESTMINSTER - There's no way to list the innumerable factors that have to converge for a team to find itself in position for a State Championship.

That's something not lost on the top-ranked **West-Oak** High School **wrestling** team, which will be looking for its first State crown since 1994 today when it takes on No. 2 **Chapin** at 3:30 p.m. at Dreher High School in Columbia.

The easiest factor to identify is without a doubt talent - something the Warriors (36-0) aren't short on after defeating No. 3 Fort Mill and No.

4 Eastside earlier in the week, while they also took care of now-No. 5 Belton-Honea Path for the Western 3A region title.

But talent alone won't do it, as the Warriors have often found themselves with a stockpile of it.

According to **West-Oak** senior Nick Bower, it goes a whole lot deeper than that this season.

"I'd say it's how we've clicked together as a team," he said. "Before, we had some strays where people weren't really connecting. It's really the chemistry we have as a team, when in years before we were this talented, but we didn't have that chemistry that teams need." It's that chemistry the Warriors are banking on to bring home a championship today - with the 1994 **wrestling** title the only State Championship that **West-Oak** can claim since opening its doors in 1983.

Coming into the season, Warriors head coach Jeff Jordan sat down with assistant coach Adam Duncan - a member of the 1994 team - and took stock of the roster and knew the potential was there for a special season.

Expanding on Bower's thoughts, Jordan also was able to look at a senior class he knew would be able to lead his team.

"I think I realized how good this team could be early on," Jordan said.

"Instead of having one senior leader like we've had the past two years, we actually have three or four kids that we could count on and know they were going to do everything they were supposed to." "Maybe they didn't know, but we knew (the team) was better than they thought they were." If the Warriors had any doubts themselves, they evaporated after facing then-No. 1 Fort Mill in Westminster as part of the Warrior Duals on Dec. 21.

Pulling out a 28-25 victory in the championship round against a Fort Mill squad that won the prestigious Southern Slam Invitational earlier in the month, that's when the Warriors realized their potential moving forward.

"They've always been pretty good, and we knew we had a good chance," said **West-Oak** senior Phillip Kern, the No. 1 wrestler at 171 pounds in the state. "When we pulled away with that first victory against Fort Mill, everybody started realizing how good we are, and that's when we started really pounding it out and getting dedicated." That dedication has led to an undefeated season in duals competition, which included the first Western 3A region crown for a boys' team at **West-Oak** since rejoining the region for the 2008-09 school year. The Warriors also captured their first Upper State title since 2003 with their victory over Eastside on Wednesday.

Much of that success, Duncan said, is a product of simply how much the Warriors have dedicated themselves to working hard with a seemingly endless slate of competitions since the season began on Dec. 3 at the Southern Slam.

"The scheduling has been fantastic," said Duncan, who also won three individual State titles from 1994-96. "These kids are getting around 60 matches, and when I wrestled, 35 was the number.

"So, they're getting a lot more now, these kids are battle-tested and I think they're ready to go." Now competing with everything on the line, the task will once again be a tall one going against a **Chapin** (25-2) team that is fresh off of wins against No. 9 Hilton Head and No.

10 St. James this week on the way to capturing the Lower State crown.

The Eagles have seven wrestlers ranked among the top three in the state at their respective weight classes, including twotime State Champion Stuart Hope at 119 pounds at No. 1 in the state, along with top-ranked 135-pounder Nate Polly, who is coming off a State title last season.

West-Oak isn't exactly far behind with five such wrestlers of its own, with several of the Warriors having claimed medals on the State stage.

"We've been coming up with good game plans because we match up well with their big kids," Bower said. "We just need bonus points where we can get them and we know they're weak at." And for Jordan, statistics don't amount to a lot as far as he's concerned, as he knows there's little standing in the Warriors' way that isn't located between their ears.

"We're battle-tested, and we've been through matches where people didn't think we had a chance," Jordan said.

"It's one of those things where you've got to push through it, and that's one of the things these kids have done time and time again.

"What they've done already is amazing in my book. (Today) is just going to be icing on the cake. We don't have to prove ourselves anymore, because we've proved we can be successful, so it's just a matter of going out and doing what we do." And if the Warriors are able to do that one last time, their efforts won't soon be forgotten.

"Everybody knows about the '94 team that won State," Kern said. "I want everybody to know about the 2011 team that won State ... and it would be awesome to leave a nice, big footprint on the tradition here at **West-Oak**." eric@dailyjm.com | 882-2385.