

# Craig-Blakely makes his mark on the mat

BY TIMOTHY RAMSEY  
THE CHRONICLE

It's no accident that Jemel Craig-Blakely became a conference champion, considering he hates to lose. The Central Piedmont heavyweight champion was on his way to the state wrestling meet, but was unfortunately called for a questionable foul. Now, his goal is to avenge that loss as a senior next year.

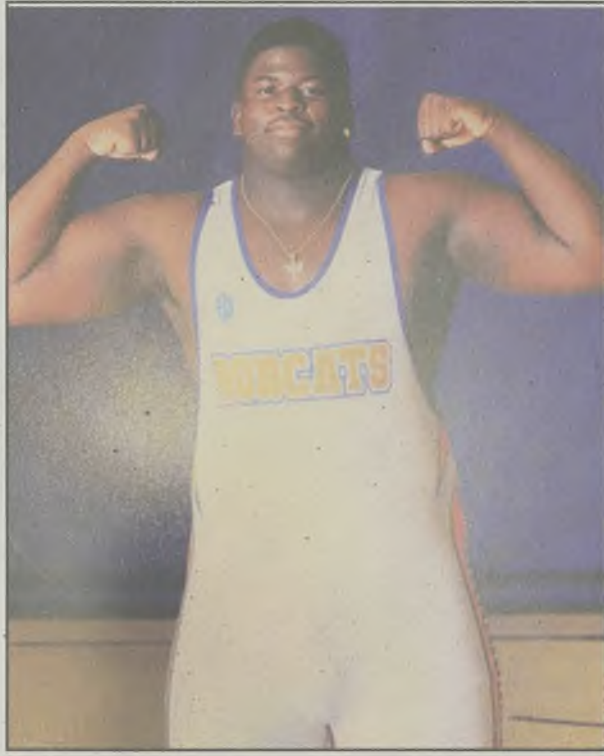
Craig-Blakely is a defensive tackle for the Glenn Bobcats football team. He took up wrestling a few years ago as a way to stay in shape during the football offseason. Admittedly, he was not very good his first year, but once he gave the sport his all and received the proper coaching, his career began to take off.

"At the beginning of the year, my goal was to become all conference, but I didn't think I would do as well as I did this year," said Craig-Blakely. "My coaches really helped me get to where I am this year."

Prior to this season, Craig-Blakely says he did nothing to prepare himself for the year, mostly because he was not planning on participating in wrestling. But due to urging from his mother, he decided to give it another shot.

"I wasn't even going to wrestle this year, but my mom forced me to by taking my phone away," he said jokingly. "After last year, I didn't think I was very good, and I didn't want to go out there and lose some more."

Jemia Blakely, Jemel's mother, said, "I wanted him to try out a second sport, a fallback sport outside of track, because he does the field events. I wanted him to use his weight to his advantage and I knew he could move



Submitted photo

Jemel Craig-Blakely was this year's Central Piedmont Conference heavyweight champion in wrestling.

well to be a big boy. I knew since wrestling is not a minority sport, they were going to think he wouldn't be successful, but he was. I just wanted him to go out there and show them he could do it."

This past season, the Bobcats captured their first team conference championship in 27 years. Blakeley was proud that her son was a part of that, especially since wrestling is not a sport African Americans flock to.

According to Craig-Blakely, he began the season slowly, but quickly turned it around and won 16 matches in a row. That winning streak allowed him to build the confidence to continue doing well on the mat.

"During the streak, I just thought I could actually be good at wrestling and maybe go to college for it, if football didn't work out," he said. "My plan is to go to state's next year and hopefully place

top four or better."

Even though Craig-Blakely suffered a tough loss during the regional round, he says he will use that as encouragement for next season.

"I was pretty mad after that loss, but then I started to think that I wasn't supposed to make it that far this year," he continued. "I went beyond my original goals for this year."

Another benefit of wrestling for Craig-Blakely is that it helps him with his footwork, athleticism and staying in shape for football. Being an athletic heavyweight, Craig-Blakely feels that gives him an advantage over many of his opponents who are bigger and slower.

After the season, several of Craig-Blakely's friends asked him about possibly wrestling. He is happy to be an inspiration to other African Americans to try the sport.



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Photo by Lisa Marie Mazocco

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This project is made possible by funding from the North Carolina Humanities Council, a statewide nonprofit and affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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