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SPORTS

High School Wrestling Was Fading. Then Came the Girls.

A rise in girls state tournaments has driven participation in girls wrestling, which is now more popular than high school gymnastics

By Rachel Bachman

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Like many high schools across the U.S., Lebanon High School in central Missouri used to have three or four girls among the dozens of boys who came out for the wrestling team each year. But most girls declined to sign up for the awkwardness and difficulty of grappling against boys.

When Lebanon High started a separate wrestling team for girls last year, however, “our numbers, they jumped big-time,” said Randy Roark, the school’s longtime coach. The Yellowjackets saw 30 girls turn out for the sport, and capped the season by winning Missouri’s first girls state high school wrestling tournament.

Statewide, girls wrestling turnout jumped to nearly 1,000, an eightfold increase from the year before. The surge startled organizers but continued a nationwide trend: As more states launch wrestling championships for girls, participation soars. It increased by more than 4,500 girls, or 28%, last season alone, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

This winter, more than half of U.S. states will have a high school wrestling tournament for girls—either an official one, a pilot test or one run by a coaches’ association.

Girls are bolstering wrestling at a time when it and other high school sports are stagnating. They’re also reinvigorating a sport nearly bounced from the Olympics six years ago.

“It’s not a stretch to say the implementation of women’s wrestling, the non-restricted, full implementation of women’s wrestling in our sport, is the best thing that’s ever happened to us,” said Rich Bender, executive director of USA Wrestling, the sport’s governing body.

Title IX of the federal Education Amendments of 1972 banned gender discrimination in schools and universities, spurring the creation of thousands of girls and women’s teams nationwide.

That created a huge pool of athletes, the best of whom move up to college sports and beyond, giving the U.S. an advantage in many women's Olympic sports.



Girls are bolstering wrestling at a time when it and other high school sports are stagnating. PHOTO: ANTRANIK TAVITIAN

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wrestling has grown from the top down. Only two U.S. states—Hawaii and Texas—had high school wrestling tournaments for girls when wrestling became a women's Olympic sport in 2004.

“Other countries look at us and say, ‘What are you doing?’” said Joan Fulp of USA Wrestling. “Why have we for 20 years made our young adolescent females wrestle against adolescent males?”

Fulp and Andrea Yamamoto, volunteer co-chairs of USA Wrestling's girls high school development committee, have spent nearly four years talking to state high school associations and coaches about how to integrate or expand girls wrestling. Their goal: for every state to have a girls high school wrestling championship.

Many coaches still balk at the notion of girls wrestling in high school, especially in states where they have little choice but to compete against boys, Fulp said. But that is changing.

“We've had so many male coaches say to us: ‘I was that guy. And then I had that one courageous girl come into my room and she changed my mind,’” Yamamoto said. (In fact, “One Courageous Girl” is the title of a digital slideshow Yamamoto and Fulp share with coaches to prepare them for that girl's arrival.)

Though the share of female wrestlers at high schools is still small—about 8% of the 269,000 total last year—it's nearly quadrupled in a decade. Meanwhile boys participation has declined 7.5%, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.



A sign in Lebanon, Mo., notes the girls' wrestling state title. PHOTO: RANDY ROARK

Darby Neely started wrestling in second grade, and said that in elementary and middle school boys sometimes would forfeit rather than wrestle her.

“Usually if they lost they would cry,” Neely said. When she got to middle school, the boys grew stronger and wrestling them got much more difficult.

Her freshman year at Lebanon High, an elegant solution

arrived: a girls team. She and her squad mates won the school's first team state title in any sport, and were celebrated at an assembly that included a visit from Missouri Gov. Mike Parson.

One of Neely's teammates, Ashlynn Leochner, joined the team last year when the girls squad formed. Leochner sometimes wrestles boys in practice, including her boyfriend Cole Roark, the coach's son, but says competitions against girls feel more evenly matched and less fraught.

“If a guy is going to lose to a girl, it's going to be a big deal,” she said. “So he's not going to go easy. With a girl, it feels a little safer, almost.”

Tamyra Mensah-Stock shows the power of girls wrestling teams. The 27-year-old from Katy, Texas, won a gold medal in the 68 kilogram class at wrestling's world championships in September. If she qualifies for next summer's Tokyo Olympics, she'll be a favorite to win a medal there, too.

Mensah-Stock's home state of Texas launched a girls state wrestling tournament in 1999, a year after Hawaii. She says she's not sure she would have taken up wrestling had her high school not had a girls team.

“I like a challenge, but I don't know,” she said. “I really don't know.”

In 2013, the International Olympic Committee shocked the wrestling world by booting the sport from the Games—cutting, in an effort to pare down the number of events, a sport that traced back to the ancient Olympics in Greece. The first Olympics without wrestling would have been 2020.

But after a world-wide outcry and reorganization effort, which included adding two Olympic weight classes for women, wrestling was reinstated. The sport got another boost last summer, when an NCAA committee recommended adding women's wrestling to its list of emerging



Tamyra Mensah, right, and Anna Jenny Fransson compete during the Wrestling World Championships in September. PHOTO: ANVAR ILYASOV/ASSOCIATED PRESS

sports, the last step before a sport becomes official.

There are 55 college women’s wrestling teams nationwide from community college to Division I, with 16 more planning to launch next season, according to Mike Moyer, executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association.

The U.S. ranks fifth all-time in Olympic women’s wrestling medals. In Tokyo 2020 it will face the No. 1 nation, competing at home.

“We’re not afraid to say it: Our goal is to beat Japan,” said Bender, the USA Wrestling executive director. “Right now Japan is the clear leader in the sport competitively. But we think our secret weapon is the school/college community here. And I think the time is coming when that will be the reason that U.S. women’s wrestling is a dominant force in the world.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Besides wrestling, what other sports could get a boost from the rise of female participation?

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