

Lamorinda female wrestling participation on the rise

By Jon Kingdon

Since 2004, what high school sport, percentage wise, can claim to have the fastest growing group of participants? In all likelihood, you've guessed incorrectly. It's wrestling. No, it's not the boys

but in fact the participation of girls in high school wrestling programs both nationally and locally has increased sharply. Why 2004? That was the first year that women wrestling became an Olympic sport.

In a major surprise, American Helen Maroulis defeated Japan's Saori Yoshida, the three-time defending champion, at the 2016 Rio Olympics to become the first U.S. gold medalist in women's freestyle wrestling to the acclaim of coaches all over the United States, which may have spurred this growth. There are now more than 14,500 high school girls who wrestle across the country and seven states sponsor girls' state championships. California has 4,505 girl wrestlers.

This past weekend, the North Coast Section tournament was held for the girls at Albany High School with each of the Lamorinda schools having at least one participant in this event. In a double elimination competition, the winners went on to the state finals. Though none of the local girls made it to the finals, they set a precedent for themselves and other wrestlers to aspire to in the future.

Shannon Lipp, a sophomore who is a first-year wrestler was the first girl to compete at this level for Miramonte. Head coach Jason Rosiak was impressed with how far Lipp has come: "For a first-year wrestler going up against more experienced wrestlers, Shannon did a solid job. She competed really

well. With her focus and effort, she will be vying for a spot in next year's state tournament."

Lipp, who also plays ice hockey on a club team, was drawn to wrestling when she saw a demonstration at school: "It looked like a fun sport and I wanted to try it. The workouts were really intense with so much emphasis on the cardio. It was hard at the start but it did get easier as it went along."

Campolindo head coach Sam Sotelo had three girls in the tournament: sophomores Arine Kim (106 pounds) in her second year of wrestling, Cecelia Chang (111) in her first year of wrestling and junior Captain Remy Benner (121).

"I am so proud of all three girls," Sotelo said. "They gave it their all and left it on the mat."

Kim, in her second year of wrestling, lost in the last second of an overtime match to the eventual tournament winner. She and Chang were also first drawn to the sport when she saw a demonstration at her school. "I did not care for MME or UFC," said Kim. "I wanted to compete in a sport with rules and regulations. It's not just a male sport. It's something where girls can excel."

Chang was drawn to wrestling for many reasons. "I liked the idea of a team concept and the individual aspect of the sport as well. It was very hard at the beginning. I like the one-on-one physical contact. It's more real than volleyball."

Benner made it to the second day of the tournament, much to the satisfaction of Sotelo: "I loved watching her wrestle and putting forth such a tremendous effort. She did a great job as a captain this year. She's been the leader of the entire team."

Sotelo cites how gender equality has encouraged the girls to participate in high school wrestling and in the youth programs. He sees how the girls have a physical advantage in one area over the boys: "The girls have more flexibility and this enables them to avoid some holds."

Alex Hasse, in her second year of wrestling, represented Acalanes at the tournament. Head coach Dave Ridge says, "Though Alex didn't place, she wrestled extraordinarily well."

Hasse, who has experience in martial arts, opted to try wrestling. "I like that it's an individual sport. It's all on you. You are accountable to yourself while also helping your team. It was intense at the start but it's a great way to stay in shape. My parents were hesitant when I started wrestling but they got over it."

There were some T-shirts being worn at the tournament that said "Wrestling: Boys Invented. Girls Perfecting," which speaks to the confidence the female wrestlers are exuding today.

Ridge treats all his wrestlers equally. "Regardless of their size, I coach them the same as the boys - they are biomechanically the same."

Rosiak sees some difference with the girls. "Girls are more flexible with better balance and they seem to do better technically. They undergo the same regimen as the boys and they wrestle with the boys as well. The attitude now is that girls can do anything."

The growth of girls wrestling was evident in the number of participants in the NCS this year compared to 2017. Ridge cited these numbers: "Last year there were 210 girls competing on three mats. This year there were 250 girls competing on four mats."

There are now 38 colleges that have women's wrestling programs. A number of colleges have started wrestling club teams for women as well. Though not offering scholarships, the clubs are facilitating the acceptance of females who wrestled in high school which may be another factor attracting these young women to this sport.



Shannon Lipp with Coach Jadon Rosiak (Miramonte)



Alex Hasse (Acalanes)



Cecelia Chang (Campolindo)

Photos provided

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