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The Northwest demise

Three four-year programs in Oregon, and none in Washington, are forcing in-state recruits to look elsewhere

by Andrew Greif | Sports editor

In the Pacific Northwest, recruiting for wrestling at the collegiate level isn't so much a matter of whom you can get, but how many you can take.

Many of the 4,500 high school wrestlers in the state are finding out that means fewer chances to stay at home and wrestle in college.

With only six colleges in Oregon offering wrestling and zero four-year institutions in Washington, any wrestlers involved with or looking to compete for collegiate programs in the region are finding their options severely limited - and the chances for post-high school wrestling grew even more grim last March when the University of Oregon wrestled its last match.

The problem facing wrestlers at the junior college and high school levels in Oregon and the nation is simple: There are fewer and fewer collegiate roster spots available for the nation's sixth-most popular high school sport.

"There are tons and tons of kids whose opportunities are shrinking in the Northwest," said **Clackamas Community College head coach Josh Rhoden**, one of the six Oregon schools to have a program. "It's a sad thing to watch happen."

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, there were 265,215 wrestlers at 10,406 high schools in 2007-08, the fifth straight year national wrestling numbers have increased. In Oregon, that number was 4,647 in 2007-08.

Those wrestlers will find their chances to wrestle past high school less likely.

The National Wrestling Coaches Association estimates that 18,063 roster spots have been lost because 669 collegiate programs have been cut around the country.

"It's pretty sad," said Mike Simons, the head coach of state power Thurston High in Springfield.

Whether it is a longtime local wrestling coach to an ex-UO wrestler in his first year, to a successful community college coach or a high school senior looking for his shot in college, many voices within the Oregon wrestling community agrees that while Oregon's decision to drop wrestling was not the sport's death knell in the state, it is part of an increasing trend that means fewer chances than ever to wrestle.

Easier to recruit, but who to wrestle?

When Oregon announced it would drop its program in July 2007, Rhoden knew it meant one less school to compete against in recruiting for the region's top talent. Ranked No. 3 in the National Junior College Athletics Association, his team has taken wrestlers other schools couldn't and helped its own success.

But with the lessened competition for wrestlers for the six schools that have programs - **Clackamas**, Southwestern Oregon Community College in Coos Bay, Pacific University in Forest Grove, Southern Oregon University in Ashland, Portland State University in Portland and Oregon State University in Corvallis - there are now even more serious concerns that could still damage those programs, said Rhoden.

"The one thing that would hurt us is if there's a lack of programs and all the sudden we have to travel to Wyoming or further (to compete)," said Rhoden, whose Cougars team is ranked No. 3 in the nation's community colleges. "Administrators might think, 'Is that our best use of our money at **Clackamas**?'"

Rhoden has tried to give more wrestlers a shot on his team, but the space of the school's mat room ultimately dictates how many remain. The team practiced at a larger room at Oregon City High School in the fall with 65 members, but cut wrestlers in order to return back to its own campus.

"There's no way, unless we built a new facility, that we could keep this many people on our roster," Rhoden said.

As a two-year institution, **Clackamas** feels the impact of wrestling's decline not only in its recruiting and traveling, but also trying to place its wrestlers at four-year programs around the nation once they leave. Ten former Cougars have found roster spots at four-year programs since 2006, when Rhoden became the head coach, including former Duck wrestler Brian Cantrell. When Sam Schmitz signed with Missouri's Lindenwood University, it signaled the trend of finding more opportunities in the Midwest and the East Coast rather than staying home. Even Oregon's four four-year colleges look good compared to Washington, where there are zero such schools with wrestling.

"I know that there's a lot of kids out there looking for opportunities because I get e-mails and letters and phone calls every single day about, 'Hey, I'm looking for a place to go,'" Rhoden said. "There's kids like these really top-notch kids in Oregon and the great ones are leaving the state."

Two opposite programs share same struggles

Ryan Dunn had only been out of high school wrestling for five years when he was asked to coach it last fall. Dunn wrestled for Oregon for four seasons, and the redshirt junior competed at the NCAA Championships last March for the Ducks in the program's final competition. The Estacada, Ore., native went looking for an assistant coach position around the area and interviewed for a job at Marist High in Eugene - only to realize halfway through the interview the position was for head coach.

Since November, Dunn has coached a very small and very young Marist team, one he

estimates is 90-percent freshmen. The 14 wrestlers on his team are the most at the school in five years, he said.

The rookie coach can associate with his young team.

"I'm pretty young so I feel like I can relate to the kids and the experiences that they're going through," Dunn said. "They're pretty fresh in my memory."

Compare that with Thurston's program, which won its fourth straight district title last weekend and has produced 17 placers at the state meet since 2006.

In his sixth season at Thurston, ranked second in Class 5A, head coach Simons has a program that started the year with 70 wrestlers and will finish with "only" 45, he said.

Anyone doubting the sport's popularity needs only to walk into the Colt's red-walled wrestling room. Its district and state title banners hang from the walls next to a list of individual champions that includes one for each of the past three years.

"It's not going to change here," he said. "It's a big deal at our high school."

Despite the stark differences, both programs are fighting to keep their athletes in the state wrestling once they graduate. Dunn knows it from personal experience, and admitted he got "lucky" to find a school where he could wrestle and go to business school for accounting while staying in Oregon. He was one of 18 wrestlers on Oregon's squad last season, which is 18 fewer spots and 9.9 scholarships (the NCAA limit for Division I wrestling) less to go around in the state.

"If I was senior in high school this year I'm not sure where I would go to get that education and that wrestling," he said.

Simons knows there are more opportunities out of Oregon, and isn't happy about it.

"A lot of the times when they go out of state they stay out of state," said Simons, a former standout wrestler for Oregon State who coached at OSU, Portland State and Newberg High before coming to Thurston. "In turn, that hurts the state in general for high school wrestling because you don't have those guys coming back to give back as coaches."

Asked to name a senior on his team this year who has a shot of making a college team, Simons says there easily are four or five. One, John Hedge, has received interest from Southern Oregon and schools in California, Missouri and New York.

"The reality is if the school is going to pay money, you just need to make sacrifices," Hedge said.

Unlike men's wrestling, women's wrestling has defied the trend and has found its opportunities at the collegiate level are growing. Participation in women's wrestling has increased every year since 1990, according to the NFHS, including 5,048 nationally in 2006-07, up from 1,629 a decade earlier.

There are eight varsity programs around the nation, including Pacific in Forest Grove,

which started its women's program in 2005 and currently has seven team members. Simons said Thurston had two girls on its roster this year, while Cottage Grove High south of Eugene has more than a half dozen girls.

For both genders, coaches and wrestlers understand the best will find spots in college, even if it's farther away from Oregon than they would have hoped, and less likely to do so with a scholarship.

"They'll find a place to wrestle," Simons said of his five college-ready seniors.

Those who want to in Oregon - and who wanted to for the Ducks - know their chances are becoming harder to come by, if not obsolete, as in UO's case.

"I can't tell you how many people I've talked to whose dream was to wrestle in an Oregon singlet," Dunn said. "It definitely kind of shuts a door but when it does, there's always a window that opens."