

Grappling with Gender: Eight Girls Wrestle for Maloney this Season

By Bryant Carpenter

Beyond the glass panel of the door that separates the Maloney wrestling room from the main gym, the girls basketball team is going through its paces. Bouncing balls reverberate around the airy space.

On this side of the door the air is much closer - stifling, almost - and the smell of sweat never seems to fade. Into this room, where records from Maloney's storied wrestling past hang on the back wall, eight girls have walked this winter.

They're not the first girls to wrestle in Connecticut or Meriden, or even at Maloney. A few are wrestling varsity. They're not the first to do that either. But the fact that there are eight of them is unusual, and those Maloney girls, plus Kayte McCarty at Platt, are part of a wave rising high enough in Connecticut to generate talk of female wrestling eventually becoming its own high school sport.

"In my opinion it will become (a sanctioned sport) because girls will take advantage of opportunities, and they deserve those opportunities," said Tony Mosa, assistant director of the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Commission.

It won't be soon. To be sanctioned by the CIAC, a sport must be offered by at least 20 percent of the member schools in the state. The minimum is 36 and currently there are zero girls wrestling teams in Connecticut. All girls wrestle co-ed.

Still, growth is expected through a combination of trickle down and grass-roots efforts.

USA Wrestling, the sport's primary organization in America, fields a national

team that competes internationally, including the Olympics (women's wrestling makes its debut next year in Athens, Greece). USA Wrestling and several other groups also stage women's tournaments and camps annually. Several American and Canadian colleges offer women's wrestling, either as a varsity or club sport.

There have been in-roads at the high-school level. The highest levels of participation reported last year by the National Federation of State High School Associations were in Texas (941 wrestlers) and California (752). All five New England states had girls wrestling: Massachusetts (58), Connecticut (57), Maine (45), New Hampshire (36), Vermont (13) and Rhode Island (9).

No one is sure of this year's number in state. Woodstock Academy drew 14 at the start of the season. Plainville weighed in four JV girls last weekend at the Windham Quad.

Some states are introducing girls-only events. Warwick High School (R.I.) held such a tournament earlier this month. A second is planned next month in Canton, Mass. USA Wrestling Connecticut is looking to establish all-girl events and clinics here.

"It's growing fast, with no visible external drive pushing it," said Roger Shaw, USA Wrestling Connecticut's director for women's wrestling. "With the girls just coming to it of their own interest, it's happening. If we can get some additional stuff out there it will let girls know that it's okay to do this."

Indeed, even with these wheels in



2002 USA Wrestling World Team Trials Championships. 112 lb. Jenny Wong, Sunkist, vs. Katies Kunimoto, PAC World Team Spot won by Jenny Wong. Photo by John C. Johnson.



motion, there are issues to contend with:

- For all the gains of gender equity, social stigma holds a firm headlock. It's not merely girls competing in a sport traditionally for boys, but girls competing in an intimately physical sport at an age where the thought of girls and boys wrestling in the back seats of cars already raises concern.
- Parents are often leery not just about the contact, but injuries.
- Many boys do not like wrestling girls. It's

2002 USA Wrestling World Team Trials Championships. 121 lb. Stephanie Murata, Sunkist, vs. Tina George Wilson, US Army. The World Team Spot was won by Tina George Wilson. Photo by John C. Johnson.

a Catch-22, they say. Win and, whoopee, you beat a girl. Lose and you're ridiculed. Some also chafe at the notion of girls, simply because they are girl wrestlers, getting more attention (such as this story) than their successful male teammates.

•The raw nerve of Title IX. That engine of gender equity in athletics has been blamed by some for the elimination of wrestling at several colleges. So many teams have been discontinued that the National Wrestling Coaches Association filed a lawsuit that has since led to a federal review of Title IX.

• The nature of the game itself. Wrestling is arguably the most physically and psychologically demanding sport. It is one-on-one; a wrestler takes the mat alone. What makes it even harder for girls is being at a strength disadvantage when they wrestle boys, particularly at the higher weight classes.

It could be argued these aren't road-blocks to girls wrestling, but fuel for girls wrestling to be its own sport.

"For both parties at the high school level, I'd like to see a women's division and that's what we're working toward," said Shaw, whose daughter Amanda wrestles varsity at Waterford High. "I won't force it.

It's got to mature and grow and we've got to get the word out."

The girls

The Maloney girls - juniors Erin Murphy, Kara Bender, Elizabeth Carlson, Jessica Mottram, Elizabeth Plotica and Jamie Rettman, sophomore Caitlin Manchester and freshman Leisa Hamrah - got the word out to each other. It was a snowball effect. The girls had been thinking about wrestling and got on board as a new coach, Steve Makein, took up the reins.

Some participated in preseason weightlifting. All have stayed with the team since the first day of practice.

They came to the mat for similar reasons. They wanted to get in shape and compete but, either through lack of ability or a sport-specific injury, didn't care for basketball or indoor track, the two girls sports Maloney offers in the winter.

None of the eight girls shy away from the physical challenge of wrestling. They welcome it.

"I really like it, proving myself physically," Murphy said earlier this season. "Being able to make it on a guys team: That's something I really pride myself on." "I don't think there's any reason why girls can't do it," said Mottram, who had a brief stint with the Spartans two years ago.

"That's the main reason I joined the team freshman year, to prove a girl can be on a team, that a girl can make it, because I think that's true."

On opening night, Murphy became the first girl to wrestle varsity for Maloney since 103-pounder Leah Watts graduated 10 years ago. Murphy opened the season at 112 and has since come down to 103. She is 4-7 on the season, pinning a boy for one of the wins.

The only other girl to wrestle varsity is Manchester. She is 3-4 alternating between 103 and 112.

The rest have wrestled primarily JV. They remain committed - not merely to stick it out, but improve.

"It was a lot tougher than I thought, definitely real hard," said Hamrah. "But I don't like to give up; I won't quit a sport."

"I just keep myself motivated," Carlson said. "I know it's always going to be hard, but I always think I'm going to get better if I go to practice."

Rettman, whose father and older brother wrestled, came in with the most experience. She wrestled for five years in Meriden's youth program. Back then, boys and girls were of fairly equal strength. That's no longer the case in high school, but Rettman is undaunted.

"I'm not as strong as them, but I'm

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going to be faster one day," she said. "You just have to work really hard to get better." Rettman added that the girls are driven to prove they belong - not just to themselves, but the boys. Coach Makein has taken notice. He says he isn't practicing or teaching any differently than if the girls weren't around.

"Our girls work hard," he said at one practice. "They train just like the boys do. They're just as intense. They're going to be at a physical disadvantage at this age, but my girls are into working just as hard as the boys are."

Makein acknowledges the girls do have safety in numbers. They have a shared experience, he said, and are not isolated as one girl would be.

And yet Kayte McCarthy is not feeling that way over at Platt. The sophomore is in her second year of wrestling, following in the footsteps of former Panther Julie Sanders, who wrestled in the early 90s.

McCarthy doesn't like being singled out as the girl wrestler. When she realized her photograph was being taken at a recent match for this story, she got up and moved. McCarthy took up wrestling because she was looking for a winter sport between volleyball and softball. She doesn't play basketball and didn't want to run indoor track. She's found the sport rough, but likes

it and expects to wrestle all four years of high school.

"She gets her chances. She'll wrestle off with the rest of them. She does everything everyone else does, nothing less," said Platt coach Bryan McCarty. "We can't take it easy on her or it will be a liability. We have to put her out there at the best of her ability. She physically needs the weight room, but emotionally, mentally she's there."

The coach says McCarthy should make varsity competition a goal. But for McCarthy, the accomplishment lies more in the doing.

"I'll give it my all," she said at the start of the season. "That's about all I can say."

The parents

The first burden of proof for female wrestlers often lies at home. Before they step out on the mat with boys, they have to convince mom and dad.

Erin Murphy's parents, while aware of their daughter's proven athleticism in field hockey and track, were uncomfortable with a co-ed sport so steeped in physical contact. Their initial agreement with Makein was that she would wrestle girls only. A new agreement had to be reached when Murphy made varsity and was due to wrestle boys.

Leisa Hamrah encountered more

parental disbelief than resistance.

"They thought I was kidding," she said. "Then they said, 'yeah.' They didn't have a problem."

Former Southington resident Maureen Cox and her husband Bob had reservations when their daughter, Christina, announced she was going out for her middle school team in Washington state.

"Bob wasn't concerned that she would be injured; he wrestled in high school and considers it a safe sport," Cox said. "My concern was more for her being groped or mistreated by some kid. Bob was more concerned that she would be an inconvenience to the team due to needing separate locker room, etc. He discussed with her the fact that hands would be everywhere and she was okay with this."

Roger Shaw didn't worry about that sort of contact until his daughter Amanda, a youth wrestler since age 8, got to high school. The best antidote, he eventually realized, was her wrestling ability.

"I've had some concerns; they've crossed my mind. But watching her compete over the years I've come to understand that she's able to stay on the mat," Shaw said. "There have been some guys who have come out smirking. That smirk goes away real fast. Suddenly they're busy with other thoughts. What's on the line is their ego."

The boys

The male reaction to girls wrestling is perhaps a bit surprising. There is no effort, subconscious or otherwise, to go easy. Faced with the Catch-22 of "you're supposed to beat a girl," boys feel compelled to win fast and decisively.

"It's tough," said Southington's 112-pounder Brandon Taricani, who could face Murphy or Manchester when the Blue Knights wrestle Maloney this Wednesday. "I don't like wrestling girls, but if I have to I'll come out with a little bit more aggression."

Bristol Central's Kyle Dess pinned Murphy in the opening minute of their 103-pound match earlier this month. Afterward, both wrestlers seemed upset.

"I don't think it's fair," said Dess. "But if they want to wrestle, let them go."

That's the consensus among the guys: If girls want to wrestle, fine, but don't expect preferential treatment - but, hey, isn't that what equal opportunity is all about?

The girls have no problem with that. In fact, they insist the boys bring it full steam. Anything else is a let down, if not an insult. One of Manchester's forfeits came at the East Haven Duals. One of the teams didn't send an opponent out to face her, she said, yet later in the day had someone wrestling

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at that weight in another match.

"That kind of annoyed me," Manchester said. "I wanted to wrestle. I didn't want to be avoided just because I'm a girl."

Overheard that same day: Maloney can't practice that hard with all those girls on the team.

"Sometimes they're abusive," Murphy said. "They'll say things before the match, but that just gives me more fuel."

The girls' reception by their Maloney teammates has been good. "I never thought I'd see the day I'd see eight girls on the team. It's good to see. It brings more spirit to the team," said senior Farag Saleh. "It just shows it's not only a guys sport. It shows these girls put in as much effort as the guys."

Jessica Mottram even has the support of her boyfriend Tim Marturano. "I kind of like it," he said. "She's doing something she likes to do. And how many guys have girlfriends who wrestle?"

Does having so many girls hurt the Spartans on that mat? No, said Makein. The girls provide a good boost if they win and a good example if they lose, especially when they go the distance and avoid a pin. It's a display of heart and guts in the face of a physical disadvantage.

"That's really nothing but a benefit," Makein said.

The law

The Maloney coach has an additional perspective. He was at Central Connecticut when the university discontinued its wrestling program.

Some college athletic directors and coaches blame Title IX for the decline of men's sports like wrestling and gymnastics. Title IX's most controversial measuring stick requires the percentage of women participating in sports to be roughly equal to the proportion of female students in the school, and that has led many schools to cut men's sports.

Other factors have played a part - a school's overall financial picture, the big piece of the male sport's budget commanded by football. But with so many wrestling teams biting the dust, the National Wrestling Coaches Association filed a lawsuit seeking a ban on Title IX's proportionality standard.

In response to that suit, Education Secretary Rod Paige convened the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics to determine whether Title IX was "working to promote opportunities for male and female athletes."

The commission, which met again in Washington D.C., has drawn severe criticism. Proponents of Title IX fear the stage is

being set for dismantling of 1972 law.

USA Wrestling, on its web site, urges members to write the commission and pose this argument: Title IX is a good law being enforced in a bad way because it hurts sports opportunities for men, which runs counter to the law's intent to provide fair opportunity for all.

"Remind them that opportunity should be based upon proven participation rather than an illogical and unfair quota system," USA Wrestling advises members. Makein sees a somewhat ironic solution for the tussle. By establishing separate women's teams, he said, wrestling better ensures its future stability.

"The more unisex sports you have, where there's a men's component and a women's component, the better off any sport's going to be. So, it's a positive for our sport to start seeing women's programs popping up," he said. "I don't think eliminating any opportunity is right. There's got to be other ways to get there without cutting sports. Just by seeing the actual effect of having programs cut - I know it's not an easy decision for an administrator to make but I can't think it's the right decision."

The future

So weather the road? During the high school season, it's the co-ed route for now in Connecticut. But there is reason for optimism. Girls golf becomes a CIAC sanctioned sport this spring. Girls lacrosse has a good shot for 2004. The number of girls hockey teams is starting to grow.

USA Wrestling Connecticut would like to establish girls-only tournaments and clinics leading up to national events.

That's no problem out of season. It does get dicey during the high school sea-

son. CIAC rules prohibit athletes from competing in events, in state or out of state, apart from the rest of their high school team. (This is why Connecticut girls have to tread carefully if they attend tournaments like the one upcoming in Canton, Mass. They have to be considered novice events.)

Shaw said USA Wrestling Connecticut will ask the CIAC to take into consideration the scarcity of all-girl wrestling events. The group also will argue that more girls-only events are needed to help the sport grow.

"What keeps them out of the room is they have to go against boys. If schools were to say we're going to have girls wrestling that strictly wrestles girls, I think you'd see girls come out for the teams," Makein said. "What keeps a lot away is they know they have to wrestle against the boys. They know they're at a physical disadvantage. You can never get over that in a lot of ways."

And yet the Maloney wrestlers, to a girl, say they prefer the challenge and camaraderie of the co-ed game, which they missed while wrestling at the Rhode Island tournament earlier this month.

"I like wrestling the guys. It's more competitive," said Manchester. "Even though I don't win against many guys, I like it better. At the girls tournament it was just the girls and the rest of the team wasn't there."

"I would pick the co-ed aspect because it pushes you to do your best," said Murphy. "If it were all girls, it would be easier. Girls aren't as strong as guys physically. Just being able to push yourself and being able to say 'yeah, I beat a guy today,' that's awesome." 🏆



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