

From: Stoner, Don stoner@augsborg.edu
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To: sports@pioneerpress.com, preps@startribune.com, sports@startribune.com, apminneapolis@ap.org, Carr, Chris chris.carr@startribune.com, Michael Rand michael.rand@startribune.com, Rachel Blount rachel.blount@startribune.com, Patrick Reusse pjreusse@outlook.com, treeve@pioneerpress.com, Jace Frederick jfrederick@pioneerpress.com, jschmit@kstp.com, Darren Wolfson dwolfson@kstp.com, clong@kstp.com, Max, Mike mmax@wcco.com, McCoy, David W dwmccoy@wcco.com, eperkins@kare11.com, dschwartz@kare11.com, Clancy, Carry cclancy@kare11.com, jrigh674@foxtv.com, dmitc770@foxtv.com, pierre.noujaim@foxtv.com, Pborzi@aol.com pborzi@aol.com, Rajkowski, Frank frajkowski@kstp.com, Andrew Hipps andrew@intermatwrestle.com, Bryan Van Kley bryan@win-magazine.com, cody@wrestlingusa.com, Craig Sesker csesker@usawrestling.org, editor@wrestlersarewarriors.com, Gary Abbott gabbott@usawrestling.org, info@theguillotine.com, Jason Bryant jason@bryantwrestling.com, Jeff Breese jbreese@intermatwrestle.com, jeff@theguillotine.com, lanny@wrestlingusa.com, Mark Palmer ideamark0h@aol.com, Mark Palmer mark@intermatwrestle.com, Mike Finn mikef@win-magazine.com, news@intermatwrestle.com, Pat Tocci ptocci@nwca.cc, results@theguillotine.com

<https://athletics.augsburg.edu/news/2019/4/15/wres041519.aspx>

AUGSBURG UNIVERSITY TO ADD WOMEN'S WRESTLING AS VARSITY SPORT

MINNEAPOLIS -- Augsburg University is continuing its tradition of being a pioneer in women's athletics by creating a varsity women's wrestling team, which will begin competition in the 2019-20 school year with Max Mejia as its first head coach, the university has announced.

By being the only collegiate institution in Minnesota to currently sponsor a varsity women's wrestling program, Augsburg continues to lead the field in adding athletic opportunities for women. Women's wrestling will be the 22nd varsity sport offered at Augsburg, and the 12th Auggie women's sport. In 1995, Augsburg was the first college or university in the Midwest to sponsor a varsity women's ice hockey team, and in 2014, Augsburg became the first collegiate institution in Minnesota to sponsor a varsity women's lacrosse team.

"I am proud that our outstanding intercollegiate athletics program will once again set a new standard for offering competition opportunities for women," said Augsburg President Dr. Paul Pribbenow. "Women's wrestling is one of the fastest growing sports in the country, and it is especially fitting that Augsburg -- with its nationally recognized men's wrestling program -- will join this movement. I look forward to our women's wrestling program recruiting top-notch student-athletes from across the country and competing at the highest level."

Adding women's wrestling will add to Augsburg's seven-decade reputation as one of the elite small-college wrestling programs in the nation. Augsburg has won 13 NCAA Division III national championships in men's wrestling, including the most recent title in March. Augsburg has earned 56 individual national champions (52 NCAA, 4 NAIA) and 251 All-Americans (213 NCAA, 38 NAIA) in its intercollegiate men's wrestling history.

Women's wrestlers at Augsburg would join their men's counterparts in using the school's state-of-the-art wrestling facilities. The Alan and Gloria Rice Wrestling Center was opened in 2006, featuring three full-size and two half-size mats for one of the largest training spaces in the country in college wrestling.

"On the heels of winning our 13th NCAA national championship this year and having a seven-decade tradition of excellence in men's wrestling, it seems appropriate that Augsburg University is opening the door to a new tradition of excellence with the establishment of a women's wrestling program," said Augsburg Athletic Director Jeff Swenson, who coached Augsburg's men's wrestling team for 25 years, winning 10 national titles with the Auggies. "Once again, Augsburg is providing opportunities for women's student-athletes. The rich tradition of wrestling at Augsburg will no doubt give the women's program a jump start. I'm proud to say that since 1995, we have added four women's sports to our athletic program. The timing to add women's wrestling is perfect as it is one of the fastest growing sports on the national level. We anticipate it becoming an NCAA sport very soon."

A native of Chandler, Ariz., and a 2015 graduate of Harvard University, Mejia brings a broad level of experience with several levels of girls' and women's wrestling to his coaching role with the Auggies. Most recently, he has served for three years as Women's and Developmental Coach at the Sunkist Kids Regional Training Center in Tempe, Ariz. The Sunkist Kids Wrestling Club has produced 55 Olympic medalists in both men's and women's wrestling. He also serves as head coach and women's coach for the Sunkist Kids Wrestling Academy. In recent years at the Sunkist Kids RTC and Sunkist Kids Wrestling Academy, Mejia has helped coach a World Team Trials champion and another finalist, two senior national team members, a U.S. Open champion, finalist and placewinner, and four Arizona high school state champions.

In addition to his work with Sunkist Kids, Mejia also serves as head coach for the Chandler (Ariz.) High School girls' wrestling team, which placed third in the inaugural Arizona state tournament this year with three qualifiers and one state titlist. He also serves as women's director for Arizona USA Wrestling and as a volunteer coach for USA Wrestling, serving as the U15 Pan American Games women's team coach that won the title in Villahermosa, Mexico in 2018.

"I am excited and honored to be selected as the first women's wrestling coach. Augsburg is an ideal place to begin a women's wrestling program," Mejia said. "First and foremost, the women will receive a quality education. The administration and I look forward to building a program with women of great character that serve as leaders in the Augsburg and wrestling communities. The tradition of excellence in wrestling has been set by the men's team winning 13 national titles. We will strive for excellence on and off the mat. Go Auggies!"

Mejia earned his bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard in 2015. He was a member of the Crimson's wrestling program

Mejia earned his bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard in 2018. He was a member of the Crimson's wrestling program, earning three varsity letters. As a high school wrestler, he was an Arizona state champion and three-time state finalist, while also earning Fargo All-American and FILA Cadet All-American honors.

"The key to any successful athletic program is a great leader and coach, and we have found that person in Max Mejia," Swenson said. "Max has been successful coaching women's wrestling at multiple levels, and we are looking forward to him leading our program to success at the national level."

Currently, 46 colleges and universities in the United States sponsor women's wrestling on the varsity level, with another 14, including Augsburg, planning to add the sport within the next two years. Most are members of the Women's Collegiate Wrestling Association, which administers the sport while it awaits official status by national collegiate organizations. Teams compete in freestyle formats in 10 weight classes, ranging from 101 to 191 pounds.

Seven NCAA Division III schools -- Adrian (Mich.), Ferrum (Va.), Lakeland (Wis.), MacMurray (Ill.), Pacific (Ore.), Schreiner (Texas) and Westminster (Mo.) -- currently offer women's wrestling on the varsity level, with Delaware Valley (Pa.), Fontbonne (Mo.), North Central (Ill.), Wisconsin-Stevens Point and Augsburg adding the sport in 2019.

Twelve NCAA Division II schools, including Midwestern programs Lindenwood-St. Louis (Mo.), McKendree (Ill.) and Tiffin (Ohio), have or are adding women's wrestling, along with one Division I program, Presbyterian (S.C.). The biggest growth in the sport has come at the NAIA level, where 29 schools have the sport or are planning to offer it in the next two years, including regional programs Jamestown (N.D.), Lindenwood-Belleville (Ill.), Missouri Baptist, Missouri Valley and Waldorf (Iowa). NAIA men's power Grand View (Iowa) is adding the sport this fall, along with Central Methodist (Mo.), and Indiana Tech is adding it in 2020. The NAIA added women's wrestling as an "invitational" sport in 2018 and held its first NAIA Women's Wrestling Invitational championship this March in Jamestown, N.D.

Several wrestling organizations, including Wrestle Like A Girl, Inc., the National Wrestling Coaches Association, USA Wrestling, the U.S. Olympic Committee and the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, have petitioned the NCAA to add wrestling to its list of "emerging sports" for women, which could significantly speed the sport's growth at the collegiate level. In recent years, the NWCA has added a 16-team women's wrestling dual-meet championship to its annual Multi-Divisional National Duals event each January.

According to the NWCA, the number of girls who wrestle at the high school level has grown from 804 in 1994 to 16,562 in 2018, and 15 states now sponsor high school girls' wrestling championships.

Women's wrestling has been an Olympic sport since 2004, with competition currently in six freestyle weight classes. American women's wrestlers have earned five medals (one gold, one silver, three bronze) in Olympic competition.

Augsburg University offers more than 50 undergraduate majors and nine graduate degrees to nearly 3,600 students of diverse backgrounds at its campus in the vibrant center of the Twin Cities and its Rochester site. Augsburg educates students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders. An Augsburg education is defined by excellence in the liberal arts and professional studies, guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran church, and shaped by its urban and global settings.

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Don Stoner - Sports Information Director
Augsburg University Athletics
2211 Riverside Ave., CB 313
Minneapolis, MN 55454
Phone: 612-330-1677
Cell: 612-875-1541
Fax: 612-330-1372
stoner@augsbu.edu
<http://athletics.augsbu.edu>
@AugsburgAuggies



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