

Idaho's Chris Owens Setting the Precedent in the Gem State

Director of Operations for Idaho USA Wrestling

By Al Fontes

The Owens surname has been well known within the Idaho wrestling circles and throughout the nation for many decades. In the 1980s, the Owens brothers, Lance, Chris, and Pat, won a combined six Idaho state titles at Skyline and Idaho Falls High Schools. The next generation continued the Owens' family tradition with Chris' son Taylor winning a 5A state title in 2015 for Borah High School in Boise and his nephew Preston (Pat's son) winning a 5A title for Kuna High School in 2021. Additionally, both Taylor and Preston each earned two All-American honors at the Fargo Nationals (2013 thru 2019), where Taylor also earned collegiate level All-American honors at the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) Nationals for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical in 2020. Fast forward to 2022 and the state of Idaho is consistently making its mark on the national scene with exceptional performances at the Folkstyle and Fargo Nationals, to name a few. The leader behind this charge is Chris, an effective component of the Idaho USA Wrestling coaching staff since 1995. Winning two state titles for Skyline H.S. and another two at Idaho Falls H.S., Chris became the first wrestler in the 5A division to win four state titles and finished his prep

career with an undefeated 123-0 record (1985-'88). Wrestling for National Hall-of-Fame and Olympic Coach Cliff Laughlin at Idaho Falls, Chris capped his senior season with a victory at the prestigious Dapper Dan All-Star Classic in Pittsburgh, PA, representing Team USA versus Pennsylvania All-Stars in 1988 and also earned freestyle All-American honors at the Junior Freestyle Nationals (finalist). Continuing his mat career at Oklahoma State, Chris wrestled for Hall-of-Fame and Olympic Coach Joe Seay, earning two All-American honors for the Cowboys and reaching the championship finals in 1992. Post college, Chris returned back to his home state of Idaho and became an assistant coach at Boise State University. He integrated himself into the Idaho wrestling scene, where today he works continuously building the Gem State into a force to be reckon with on a national level.

"I coached Chris from an early age. He was always committed to the sport, to excellence, and has given back so much to the sport and to the coaches and wrestlers of Idaho."

- Cliff Laughlin



Chris Owens at last year's Fargo Camp with team Idaho that would produce an all-time state record with 24 All-Americans, surpassing the previous record by nine. Photo by Al Fontes.

The Boise State wrestling program dates back to 1959 and for close to sixty years produced many great wrestlers, including several Big Sky Conference Champions, PAC 10/12 Champions, NCAA All-Americans, NCAA Champions, and PAC 10/12 Championship teams until being discontinued in 2017. From his first season at Boise State in 1996-'97 until its discontinuation, Chris was an integral part of the program's success for just over twenty years. During his tenure, he was part of six PAC 10/12 Conference Championship teams and was instrumental in the program producing 44 individual conference champions, 26 NCAA Division I All-Americans, and two NCAA individual champions. Simultaneously, he joined the Idaho USA Wrestling coaching staff in 1995. From Chris' early beginnings with the national team, the Gem State experienced immediate gains at the Cadet and Junior Nationals. Prior to 1995, Idaho averaged 2 All-Americans (AAs) per year from 1980 to 1989 and the same from 1990 to 1994. It was during Chris' first year on the staff that Team Idaho produced a record 9 AAs and continued with an average of 5 AAs per year through the remainder of the 1990s. Then from the beginning of the new millennium, Idaho averaged 9 AAs per year in the first decade (NOTE: women's AA status began in 2008) and increased to 13 AAs until 2020 where the Fargo Nationals were cancelled due to the COVID pandemic. Furthermore, Team Idaho produced a record high All-American honors of 15 each in 2010, 2012, and 2013. Exceeding expectations, in 2021 Team Idaho sent its largest contingent to Fargo with 109 wrestlers and produced an all-time state record of 24 All-Americans, surpassing the previous record by nine.

It's not difficult to surmise that the exponential rise in participation and performance on the national level is a result of Chris Owens' leadership efforts and the time he has invested into the wrestling program in Idaho. According to Chris, the success of wrestling in Idaho is not solely a result of his efforts, but a consolidated effort from coaches and volunteers throughout the state that has built and brought together Idaho's elite to showcase their skills and talent on a national stage. Most of all, he believes that in team work, everybody plays a role in the process of success. It's team work coupled by action, action, and more action.

"I am a believer in WE, not me."

- Chris Owens

In 2017, Chris increased his responsibilities from being a fulltime national coach to assuming the role as Director of Operations for Idaho USA Wrestling. In this role, he was now in charge of running tournaments throughout Idaho, membership growth (edging towards a record 4,000 USA Wrestling participants in 2022), National Team operations (travel team), and the overall training program. Since assuming this role, Chris has truly dedicated himself to the betterment of wrestling in the Gem State. His devotion to the sport is evident with his tireless commitment to continuous improvement and pursuit of excellence at the state and national levels. The Director's role is definitely not a part time function. The following is a general overview of Chris Owens' BLUE PRINT FOR ACTION:

- **Grow wrestling throughout the state**
- **Build a wrestling culture**
- **Create a TEAM IDAHO Concept – Bring each region of Idaho together (North, South, East, West)**

- **Grow all three styles of wrestling; Freestyle, Greco-Roman, and Folkstyle**
- **Working with coaches and clubs throughout the state**
- **BEST ON BEST PRACTICES – Conduct state practices three times a week with kids in the Treasure Valley area. Expanding to other regions of Idaho (Open to all wrestlers with USAW Membership)**
- **Facilitate travel opportunities to National Duals, Folkstyle Nationals, World Trials, Fargo, etc.**

In summary, Chris has long been an integral part of the growth and success of wrestling at all levels in the Gem State of Idaho. It has been his involvement, coupled with the organization and commitment of other coaches, staff, and volunteers, that has elevated the Idaho wrestling program to a level that competes on the national stage and has had representation on several Pan American and world teams. As Director of Operations for Idaho USA Wrestling, Chris' ability to lead is evident with the increased growth in participation and the more recent performances at the USAW Folkstyle and Fargo Nationals, where Team Idaho has won back-to-back Folkstyle team titles in 2021 and 2022 and sent its largest contingent to Fargo last summer, bringing home a record 24 All-American honors (boys and girls divisions). Considering that the population in Idaho is approximately 1.9 million, the per capita statistic is remarkable compared to other states with much larger populations (NOTE: At the international level, the Republic of Dagestan in Russia's Northern Caucasuses between the Black and Caspian Seas produces the largest number of World and Olympic level wrestlers per capita with a small population of 3 million – 2018 estimate). Overall, Team Idaho has produced a total of 265 Freestyle/Greco All-Americans with 37 individual National Champions (Cadet/16U, Juniors, and Women) since 1995. His non-stop efforts and leadership have definitely discovered the "Hidden Gems" of wrestling talent for some time. Last summer, Chris was recognized for his efforts and received the WUSA Youth Development Coach-of-the-Year award at Fargo Nationals and later this year will be inducted into the Idaho Chapter of the National Wrestling Hall-of-Fame for Lifetime Service. There are many great things happening in the Gem State and I look forward to highlighting the future years to come. Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Chris and do a Q&A to discuss the history of wrestling in Idaho, his Blue Print for Action, his family, the future of Idaho USA Wrestling, and the precedent he has set moving forward.

Q&A WITH CHRIS OWENS

How did you first get involved in the sport of wrestling?

OWENS – My first memory of wrestling is as a first grader or Kindergartener. Living in Boise near Capital High School, my older brother "Lance" was in a club that had practice once or twice per week. The coach or adults running the practice told me to sit on the fireplace and watch since I was too young to be involved. I had to watch the first couple of practices as the kids practiced in a living room on the carpet. Well, that didn't last long...before long, I had rug burns on my knees along with all of the other kids. I don't

remember who the coach was or the name of the club, just that I was really intrigued with the sport from the beginning.

Who were your role models growing up? How did they inspire you to be the person you are today?

OWENS – My biggest role model growing up was probably my dad, “Rick Owens.” His work ethic and ability to stay focused on a goal until completed impressed me. Although he never wrestled, his habits remind me of someone that did - I’m sure he would have been very good at it if he would have. He has more grit at almost 80 years old than most people half his age. Other than my dad, I have been fortunate to have had some great coaches: Cliff Laughlin (high school coach) and Joe Seay (college coach), each were great at passing on their love for our sport to me! Both very humble, soft spoken and able to whoop someone’s behind, if needed...how could you ask for more as a young wrestler than that. To be completely honest, I like that they were both family men and loved the sport of wrestling, but didn’t put wrestling in front of their family. I think to be truly successful you have to have a healthy balance in life!

What life lessons have you learned in wrestling that applies in your day-to-day life?

OWENS – That’s a great question and I’m probably still learning in this area just like everyone else. I think the life lessons I’ve learned in and thru wrestling is that staying focused on family and personal relationships is just as important or more important than anything I will ever do wrestling related. Back to my comment about trying to keep a healthy balance in everything I do has helped me find greater fulfillment in all areas of my life. As I’ve gotten older, it has been far more rewarding to take the approach of serving and helping wrestlers fall in love with our sport and enjoying the process rather than keeping track of the results.

What do you enjoy most about coaching?

OWENS – Teaching techniques and the mental approach to our sport is by far the most rewarding, especially when a wrestler really starts to fall in love with the process of being a wrestler. It’s so much fun to guide, teach and develop all of the areas that it takes

to be a wrestler. It’s hard to say which one area I enjoy the most. If I had to choose one area, it’s probably having the opportunity to share my love and passion for wrestling with others whether it’s a wrestler, coach or parent. It’s incredibly rewarding to pass on what I have learned from others.

As Director for Idaho USA Wrestling, what have been your greatest challenges?

OWENS – As the Director of Idaho USA Wrestling, I have duties that require me to be a coach and a director at other times. With approximately 4,000 USA Wrestling members in Idaho, I have duties that require me to create schedules for events, training camps, travel teams, and to communicate these plans to our Idaho USA Wrestling membership. I have been coaching most of my adult life to be honest. It’s easier for me to just stay in the coaches mindset, but learning to balance coaching and being a director has helped me to learn how to invest deep sometimes and shallow others. My greatest challenge has probably been learning how to stay focused and prioritize my time in the areas I can have the biggest impact.

Under your leadership Team Idaho took first place at the 2021 and 2022 USAW Folkstyle Nationals, as well as produced a record 24 All-American honors at Fargo last summer. This performance is an exponential improvement since you first joined the Idaho coaching staff back in 1995. Explain what it took to reach this level of wrestling in Idaho and nationally.

OWENS – To be quite honest, I feel like we have always had a lot of quality wrestlers in Idaho, but developing talent is a real thing in our sport and we have many quality coaches in Idaho that have their fingerprints on this recent blueprint of success! It would be remiss of me not to mention the growth we have had in Idaho within our Board of Directors with Idaho USA Wrestling. Our current board has representation from all regions of Idaho. We have some real high quality individuals that are serving on our board that have helped us create a culture and commitment towards cooperation, support, communication and knowledge within the sport of wrestling! Many of our board members are



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The advertisement features a wrestler in a blue singlet and white shorts in a starting crouch on the left. On the right, there is a circular inset showing a blue digital scale and a black carrying case labeled 'SUMMIT WRESTLING OFFICIAL SCALE'. The background is a blue and white geometric pattern.

2022 IDAHO WRESTLING

Tristan Bremer JR GR 7th
Christopher Martino JR GR 8th
Aden Attao JR GR Runner-up
Kyle Rice JR GR 8th
Jaxton Packer 16U GR 4th
Mia Furman 16U 6th
Joely Slyter 16U WM 8th
Tanner Frothinger 16U GR Runner-up
Hudson Rogers 16U GR 8th
Tucker Bowen JR FS 7th
Matthew Martino UFS Pan-Am Champion Folkstyle National Champion 16U GR Runner-up
Kolter Burton JR GR National Champion JR FS 5th
Dante Roggio JR GR 4th
Cade White 16U GR 6th
Mack Mauger Triple Crown Champion
Treygen Morin 16U GR 7th
Marissa Jimenez JR WM 7th
Alyssa Randles JR WM 6th
Dedrick Navarro 16U FS 4th
Derek Matthews JR GR 3rd JR FS 8th
Jason Mara Folkstyle National Champion 16U FS 5th
Jadon Skellenger Cadet GR National Champion

Chris Owens
USAW Developmental Coach of the Year

10/22-23	Wester States Preseason	3/11-12	Intermountain Warrior Challenge	6/19-25	Turf Wars/Western States
10/29-31	Preseason Nationals	3/18	Girls Folkstyle Nationals	6/26-28	Kids Nationals
11/13	Upper Valley Aces Duals	3/25-26	Folkstyle State	7/15-22	16U & Junior Nationals
11/20	Bigfoot Battle	4/1-3	Folkstyle Nationals		
12/17	Middle School State	4/14-16	Heartland Duals		
12/19	Xmas Clash Tryouts/Kids Festival	4/26-30	US Open		
12/31	Xmas Clash Duals	5/6-7	Idaho FS & GR State		
1/1	Salt Lake Slam	5/12-14	Western Regionals		
1/21-22	Legacy Duals	6/8-12	14U National Duals		
3/5-6	Idaho Open	6/7-11	16U National Duals		

Photos by Austin Bernard, MatFocus, Randy Jones, Sam Janicki, Tony Rotundo & USAW Idaho parents
 Designed by Sugiyama Productions

depending on how it's handled. I think there's no question that the positive outweighs the negative by far. I think with success it's always important to remember what has worked in the past and stay in line with the philosophies and principles that help guide the ship. Hopefully with our recent success, it will help us on the promotions side of things and ultimately grow at the grassroots level, getting more Idaho youngsters on the mat and create more high quality opportunities for the ones that are already involved.

As a wrestler, what did you learn from your mentors and experiences that you use today as a coach?

OWENS – I have had to learn how to invest deep and not so deep at other times based on the variables of the situation. Learning how to let other people play a role “good, bad or in between” has made a BIG difference in my life! I didn't learn this on my own. I've been fortunate enough to have people around me that have pointed me in a good direction and I am thankful for this! This is an ongoing process for me because I tend to like to grab the wheel and drive, but it's been far more rewarding for me to learn how to be excited for others to have the opportunity to lead and be part of the process. I guess this is a huge part of being involved with a non-profit organization because of the mixture between an employee and volunteer.

Outside the sport of wrestling, what other hobbies or family functions do you enjoy the most?

OWENS – Number one – spending time with my wife Robyn of 22 years that's been by my side thru all of this wrestling journey, her companionship has meant Everything!! So, whatever it is we are doing, we do it together as a family and I guess that's what we enjoy most. I also enjoy upland bird hunting (we have 2 bird dogs, which are English Springer Spaniels). Also enjoy fly fishing (My boys, Taylor & Cade, and I). Other family hobbies include going to my wife's family cabin in Island Park just south of Yellowstone National Park to fish, hike, and enjoy the outdoors.

Team Idaho's 2022 Fargo All-Americans poster was designed by Koral Sugiyama, 2x Fargo All-American for Idaho.

highly successful business men/women, high school teachers and coaches that have all contributed to bringing a winning culture to Idaho USA Wrestling. It sure is nice working with a group of people that are all pulling on the rope in the same directions and have a genuine interest in doing things for the kids/wrestlers in our state.

What are the benefits and challenges of the recent success you have had in Idaho wrestling?

OWENS – With success comes expectations and ownership both of which can be challenging, but can also be a great thing

