

B-ville coach banks on system, not luck

(The Associated Press)

By his own account, Leo Johnson was only an average wrestler in college. As a high school coach, though, he has made wrestling a way of life in the little upstate New York village of Baldwinsville.

It has not been luck that has made Baldwinsville High School's wrestling team No. 1 in New York state the last three years. Johnson has created a program that reaches far out into the community and is the envy of wrestling coaches around the country.

In his 17 years as a coach Johnson's teams have compiled a 246-36-5 won-loss-tie record.

His Baldwinsville team is on a 56-meet winning streak and has lost only two of 128 meets in the last decade.

Baldwinsville has dominated its conference, winning 10 league titles and eight in a row since 1972.

Last year, Johnson was named wrestling coach of the year by the National High School Athletic Coaches Association.

Johnson has succeeded in making wrestling, a minor sport in most high schools, a mania in Baldwinsville. He has mothers coaching his peewee teams, a local shopping center gives his wrestlers storefront space to practice and when the Bees go on the road for a big meet the team bus is followed by fans in chartered buses.

The basis of Johnson's success is his peewee program for youngsters 8 to 12 years old. Every Saturday, he has 168 youngsters wrestling at the junior high school gym where they learn the basics of the sport and divide up into teams to compete against each other.

Parents, including mothers, coach the peewees which have included some girl wrestlers who grew up to be officials.

After they outgrow the peewee programs, Baldwinsville's wrestlers can join the local Olympic freestyle team, compete on the two junior high teams before advancing to the freshman, junior varsity and varsity squads in high school. Johnson has nearly 300 wrestlers involved in his program.

The high school's junior varsity and varsity teams have their own cheerleading squads and a booster club raises about \$5,000 a year to help the team meet expenses.

"It's something that has grown and grown. Wrestling is the largest money maker in the district. We draw more fans than football or basketball and frequently we have to move our meets to accommodate

large crowds," said Johnson.

Johnson's program has produced several outstanding wrestlers, including four state champions.

By the time a wrestler leaves Baldwinsville he has a decade of wrestling experience behind him. Nine of the ten seniors who graduated from last year's team are wrestling in college and all 12 seniors from the year before are wrestling in college. Johnson even boasts that two wrestlers who could not make his varsity lineup in high school are varsity wrestlers on their junior college teams.

"We've got kids wrestling from UCLA to Boston. We've got them all over the place," says Johnson.

Fulton Coach Wayne Bleau knows first hand how good a program Johnson has put together at Baldwinsville. In the last four years Fulton has lost to only one conference team — Baldwinsville.

"Wrestling is not just a sport in Baldwinsville. It's a way of life. Their technique is second to none and they are well disciplined," said Bleau.

Bleau credits Johnson for raising the caliber of wrestling in the area.

"We all have to keep on our toes and work extra hard or else get beat very badly by Baldwinsville. We would be league champions anywhere else, but you have to be the best in the state to win the championship here," the Fulton coach said.

Johnson says he does not like having wrestlers losing a lot of weight to fit into his lineup and he insists his wrestlers eat three meals a day.

Johnson says he keeps close contact with his wrestlers and is proud of the lessons his athletes can learn about life through the sport.

"There is a lot more teaching about life through wrestling and there is so much you can teach them after school," Johnson says.

"I love practice. Our practices are just as exciting as the matches. We have a lot of overachievers who aren't necessarily the best athletes. They may hardly be able to walk a straight line, but when they put on that uniform you wouldn't know that."

"Most of the kids are students of the sport. They read. They spend their spring and summer traveling, visiting and learning about wrestling," said Johnson.

This year the Bees are ranked third in the state and are scheduled to face top-rated Canandaigua Feb. 7 at Community College of the Finger Lakes in a non-league match-up.