



SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

Home alone Having few teammates gives Greece Olympia wrestler Jeremy McBeth plenty of seating room in home match against Hilton. Olympia coach Tony Russo, left, says coaches "have to adjust to the way the kids are (today)." ★

Wrestling takes hard fall

Lack of glamour and dedication spelling doom for the sport, concerned local coaches say

By JEFF DiVERONICA
STAFF WRITER

Wrestling has been called an endangered species among high school sports in Section V.

Dwindling numbers for tryouts. Increasing numbers of in-season quitters. Attendance dropping faster than a referee's fist on a mat.

"I'm scared to death that by the year 2000 there won't be any high school wrestling around here," says Jack Yengo, coach at Webster for 27 seasons and Monroe County League chairman for the last seven.

But coaches can't pin wrestling's decline on one reason.

"If it were one clear thing, you could just attack it and solve the problem," Greece Olympia coach Tony Russo says.

There are several reasons:

■ **Failing junior-high programs:** They're struggling at



SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

Psyched up Hilton's Jake Hennekey takes to the mat against Olympia. Only two Monroe County League schools, Spencerport and Brockport, field full teams. There were 85 forfeits at County Championships.

Demise

FROM PAGE 1D

most schools and non-existent at others.

■ **Dedication debate:** It is three-fold. Coaches say athletes don't want to work as hard as they used to. They also say their peers aren't as driven. And school administrators aren't backing a sinking sport.

■ **Stigmas:** All work and no glamour because of low fan turnout and less media coverage, plus the cutting-weight issue, has been especially damaging.

■ **One-sport specialization:** The days of three-sport athletes are numbered. Athletes would rather work year-round on one sport to try to land a college scholarship.

Only four of Rochester's seven City-Catholic League schools field wrestling teams and two others are combined. East is the only team that regularly has a full lineup.

There were 85 forfeits during last weekend's Monroe County Championships, topping the previous high of 67, recorded last year. Yengo says only two schools, Spencerport and Brockport, had complete lineups with wrestlers in each of the 14 weight classes.

City hurt in junior high

Although East can field a full 12-wrestler lineup for dual matches, McQuaid and Marshall average about three forfeits. Franklin can't do much better. Edison and Wilson combined teams, but are still having trouble. Aquinas doesn't compete.

Marshall began the season with 35 wrestlers, which is about average, according to eighth-year coach Gordon Pegg. The Jurists are down to 17. McQuaid has gone from 17 to 12.

"There's no dedication," says Pegg, the league chairman. "I started the program at Marshall and had three or four kids at first. About three or four years ago we had our heyday. It's gone downhill since."

"The main reason is in the city we have no junior-high programs to bring them in. When we get a wrestler we're starting from scratch in the eighth or ninth grade."

It's different at Section V powers Spencerport and Canandaigua, ranked fifth and eighth, respectively, among the state's large schools.

Spencerport coach Bill Jacoutot says he has 62 wrestlers in his junior-high program. His pee-wee program, which runs once a week on Saturdays, usually has between 50 and 80. Canandaigua has 46 in junior high and 94 in grades 3-6.

"We try to make it fun early. When they get to junior high we glamourize it more," Jacoutot says.

Spencerport and Canandaigua even take time to piece together a highlight video to show youngsters.

Rich Romeo, Canandaigua's third-year coach, is also a junior-high physical education teacher, which helps him find potential wrestlers at a young age. He says being around school often — coach-



SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

Rooting interest Hilton cheerleaders offer encouragement to Mike Faulkau, right, against Greece Olympia's Don Carlo Clauss.

es aren't if they don't work in the district — is crucial to the program's success.

"Of course, you want the best athlete," he says, "but I also look for the kid that has that drive in him."

Is dedication dead?

Some coaches say nowadays athletes don't possess a worth ethic as strong as wrestlers of a decade ago.

"The biggest problem is today's kids," McQuaid coach Lou Teike says. "This is a very demanding sport and many kids can't and won't hack the discipline anymore."

Romeo sees it as a national trend.

"Wrestling is a microcosm of society," he says. "In our society there is less discipline, less commitment, less of the things that are required in wrestling."

Coaches say workouts are more grueling than in other sports.

"(Wrestling is) definitely not preceded by the word 'play,'" says Art Connorton, in his 35th year as coach at Irondequoit. "You play

football. You play basketball. Nobody plays wrestler."

Others say the deteriorating work-ethic theory is ludicrous, that it's a coach's job to motivate athletes.

"It's a little bit of a copout for coaches to say kids don't want to work as hard," says Olympia's Russo, in his second year, "because to a certain degree as coaches we have to adjust to the way the kids are."

Jacoutot says coaches must outwork their athletes if they expect a reciprocal effort.

"I think the days of putting up the sign-up sheet and letting it go are over," Spencerport's 14th-year coach says. "I'm sick of hearing people tell me how bad the sport is."

"(Coaches) are whining, but they're not getting out there and getting the job done. I'm not buying into that. Roll your sleeves up, go to work and get it done."

Jacoutot says unlike Pennsylvania, where matches are televised and draw 4,000 fans, wrestling here



SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

No letdown Participation is not a problem for Spencerport's wrestling team, ranked fifth in Section V. The program has perhaps the area's strongest feeder system, from junior high to pee wee.

needs promotion.

"You've got to sell it to the kids. It's not on TV like basketball or football," he says.

Olympia's most accomplished wrestling team still draws little support. The team had its best finish at the county championships (sixth) but routinely draws fewer than 100 fans. Russo doesn't believe the Titans (6-4), who forfeit four bouts per match, have full support from the school. The booster club provided concessions at only two of six home matches, he says.

"An adult pays \$2 at the door and a student \$1 and they can't even get a cup of coffee or soft drink because no one is here selling concessions," Russo says.

Participation and support have waned in today's world, which presents students with more choices (part-time jobs, earlier dating, etc.).

"A lot of rules weren't there (in the past), like for eligibility," East Rochester coach Mike Cronmiller Sr., says.

ER, once a state powerhouse under former coach Don Quinn, is trying to rebuild. The Bombers were 368-54-9 under Quinn from 1958-89. The defending Class C sectional champions are 2-6 this season, including a 58-6 loss to Penfield. Thursday night, ER lost 39-24 to Fairport, but gave up 30 points by forfeiting five weight classes.

"When (Quinn) retired, the program went on his merit for several years," Cronmiller says. "Then it came to a screeching halt."

Before Cronmiller arrived two years ago, ER went through six coaches in six seasons.

Fewer fans, media glory

Many little boys in Spencerport, which hasn't had a football team

There were 85 forfeits during last weekend's Monroe County Championships, topping the previous high of 67, recorded last year. Only Spencerport and Brockport had wrestlers in all 14 weight classes.

since 1940, want to wrestle when they grow up. The Rangers draw between 500-1,000 fans at home matches. Wrestlers wear T-shirts which read, "All Our Heroes Are Rangers," a tribute to the school's tradition of past champions.

But overall, attendance at county schools is down.

It's worse in the city. A recent match at Edison drew eight spectators. McQuaid's Teike says no dual match in his seven seasons has had more than 125.

Small crowds hurt wrestling's image. Not many athletes want to compete if no one's watching or the media don't pay much attention.

Local television stations rarely give nightly wrestling results as they do for basketball.

"If a kid just gets in a basketball game he get his name in the paper," Yengo says. "A boy can lose a tremendous match and he won't get his name in. They just want the pins."

Coaches admit it's wrong for athletes to base participation on crowds and coverage, but they do.

Cutting weight

Perhaps the biggest problem facing the sport — and it has been this way for years — is shedding the stigma of unnatural weight-cutting.

Many schools have preseason meetings and distribute literature

to parents and wrestlers to educate them on proper eating habits for performance and weight-cutting.

"We don't make them cut any more than they should," Jacoutot says. "We really try to monitor them closely and make sure they eat and drink every day."

Dangers of improper weight-cutting are many, including eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, impairment of motor skills and liver and kidney damage.

Another possible side effect is called the "yo-yo syndrome," or chronic weight fluctuations that might remain for one's lifetime.

"Some people are losing too much weight," Webster's Yengo says. "(Coaches) entice them to go down. They encourage them to go down, and they go down for one reason: to win. I'm not pointing fingers, but I see evidence of it."

There is no simple solution to wrestling's woes. Each program must improve its own deficiencies. The one idea Yengo plans on proposing is geared toward getting more fall athletes to wrestle.

"Start wrestling season the Monday after Thanksgiving," Yengo says. It begins in early November now. "Fall sports athletes will have a break and hopefully we can get some football players interested. We have to try something." □