

Pioneering wrestler excels against boys

★ By JEFF DiVERONICA
STAFF WRITER

ATTICA — It was the first match of the season and Attica's 98-pound wrestler had won by a pin in just 83 seconds.

"When the guys come off the mat after their match I always shake their hand and give them a whack upside the butt," coach Eric Romesser recalled. "So I shook her hand and I'm thinking of her as just another wrestler, so I whacked her right on the butt."

Her?

Her name is Emme Conway, an eighth-grader believed to be the first girl in Section V and the state to compete in boys varsity wrestling.

"After I did it," Romesser said of his congratulatory pat on the backside, "I said, 'Wait a minute. I wonder if I should be doing that?'"

"So I went up to her father afterward and said, 'This might sound dumb, but ...' And he said, 'By all means, you treat her like you do any of the other guys. We're not taking anything out of context here.'"

Conway's opponents shouldn't either. She isn't a novelty act. Her 8-4 record includes third- and sixth-place finishes in tournaments, and she will compete in the Teike-Bernabi Tournament, which begins today at Spencerport.

She has wrestled since age 5 with her father's club in Johnsonburg, just south of Attica in Wyoming County.

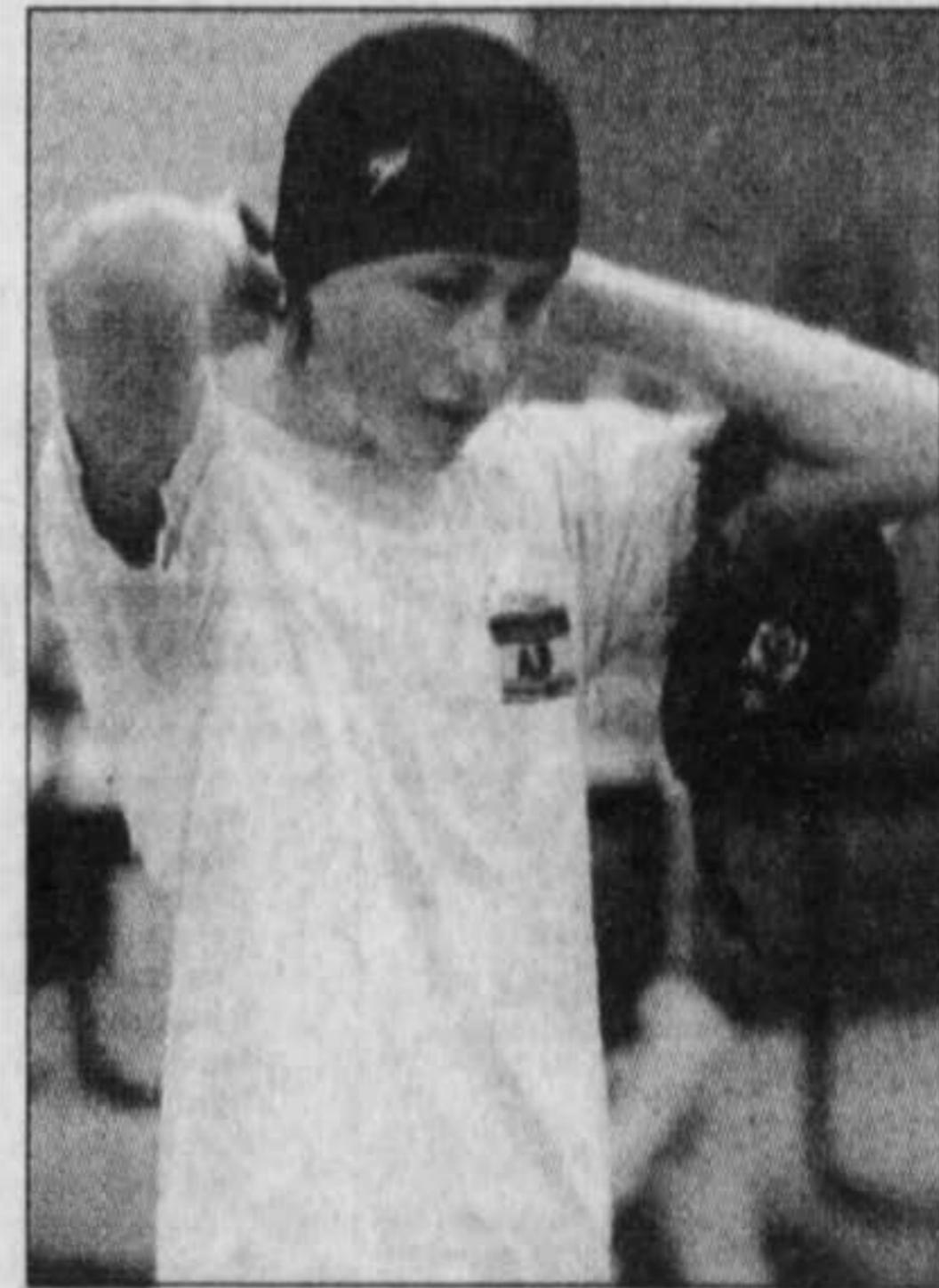
"She seems tough enough physically and mentally to handle it," said Spencerport coach Bill Jacoutot, who watched Conway place sixth among 20 boys Dec. 15-16 at the Jamestown Tournament. "I just sat there in admiration. You get blinded by her competitive ability."

"I wanted to shake her hand afterward but I didn't get the chance."

Some don't think girls should have the chance to wrestle boys. Girls wrestle in youth tournaments, but as they mature physically and emotionally they're expected to grow out of it.

"Some coaches like to think this is our little sanctuary, as far as wrestling being dominated by

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98-pound phenomenon Emme Conway of Attica stuffs her hair under a swimming cap before donning headgear in practice.

Wrestler

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men," Romesser said. "But with Title IX and all of this other stuff, I just don't think they're really staying up with the times here. I don't think it should be an issue. Twenty years ago it might have been different than today."

More and more girls are competing in boys wrestling. The National Federation of State High School Associations reports more than 200 girls competed in boys programs last year, although Section V chairman Don DeBadts and the state public schools association couldn't recall an instance. Girls at Avoca, Dundee, Penfield and South Seneca compete for the junior varsity.

Conway, 14, speaks in a soft, high-pitched voice. Her curly, shoulder-length red hair can't be seen by opponents because she wears a swimmer's bathing cap beneath her head gear. She also wears a body suit beneath her singlet.

Her tolerance for pain matches any of her opponents.

"... I wasn't sure if she could handle the pounding," Romesser said. "After she got in there and started practicing, guys would be cranking on her neck or tearing her arm out of the socket and she didn't stop."

Opponents who lack respect only stoke Conway's intensity: "Most of the time it just makes me mad and I want to beat them more."

At 5-foot-2, she is wiry and usually taller than most opponents, which provides more leverage. Technically, she wrestles solidly, but is sometimes overpowered.

That Conway competes for the boys varsity isn't big news in Attica. She comes from a wrestling and farming family. Her father wrestled and runs a club team. Her brothers, Tyler, a junior at 112 pounds, and Clayton, 12, also wrestle.

Conway's teammates knew when she was old enough she would try out for varsity, and they have accepted her.

Romesser said her participation has caused no problems at Attica. Crowds at home matches and tournaments have rooted for her.

Senior 119-pounder Jeff Mye says he, fellow tri-captains Greg Laude (155) and Dave Prefontaine (167) know how the team would



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Practice makes perfect Emme Conway works on her wrestling technique against teammate Jeff Embt at Attica High School.

react if someone heckled Emme or any other team member.

"We'd take care of them. I have no doubt in that," Mye says. "We'd all stand up for her."

Romesser realizes Conway will eventually meet resistance.

"I know other (athletic directors) in our league that have said when it comes time to wrestle us they will forfeit that match (against Conway)."

That's been going on for years at the JV level. Corning coach Pat Barnes says 10 years ago when he was at Thomas Edison in Elmira Heights, Chemung County, his 126-pounder, Chris Cassada, couldn't get a match. "They didn't want to get beat by a girl."

Some coaches say as boys get older, it's unfair to ask them to wrestle a girl.

"I've had several boys in my youth club get beaten by her and it's really had a negative effect on them," said coach John Grillo of Holley. One boy "didn't know how to react. I even had some fathers withdraw their sons from wrestling her."

Conway's success transcends the

high school level. She placed 15th against college-age women last summer at the America's Cup in New Mexico, and finished fourth in the open division of a women's national tournament in Arizona. She ran varsity cross country last fall, and is a talented basketball player and diver.

She simply wants to wrestle, and says she won't give up like many other girls "because I like it."

"When she gets older and starts becoming more mature and that whole thing," Romesser said, "If then she's into boys and doesn't want to wrestle, her father said that's fine, too."

Conway believes she can win a Genesee Region league title, perhaps place in the top four in the Class B sectionals.

Romesser realizes there may be some hard feelings along the way. Opposing coaches may protest by forfeiting matches, something Jacoutot thinks would be unjust.

Her sex may not be the issue, Jacoutot says, "the number one reason is I don't think anyone wants to lose to her. If anybody tells you different, they're lying." □