

'BALANCE COUNTS MORE THAN MUSCLE'

# Tonawanda's Girl Wrestlers — One of First Teams in Country

By MARIA SCRIVANI

When Marilyn "Bo" Bateman was nine years old, she was a "guinea pig" for her big brother Neal. He needed someone to practice his wrestling moves on — and there she was.

"That's how I first got interested," Marilyn recalls. And now she has started the first girls' wrestling team in the state at Tonawanda High School.

Marilyn, who's very petite, explains. "Wrestling isn't the muscular sport you think it is. It's a lot of technique — you learn certain moves and balance."

In fact, she answers critics who don't think women can compete in this sport. "Winning depends on how well you know your moves. The girls have an advantage, because women have lighter bones. As boys get older, they get heavier." She adds, "If you get a girl who can stay at 92 pounds (the lowest weight class) until her senior year, she'll have four years experience over her underclassmen opponents."

**THE TONAWANDA GIRL** wrestlers, first in the state, are also one of the first teams in the country. "There are two girls wrestling on a varsity team in California, and I think there is a team in Ohio, but they don't have anyone to wrestle," Marilyn says.

The Tonawanda team is really an intramurals club right now, but she foresees women wrestling men in the same weight class on varsity teams someday.

Still, Marilyn understands the objections raised by many people concerned about the implica-

tions of male-female wrestling. "That's why I'd rather not see girls wrestle boys right away," she says. "not at the high school level, anyway. Though I see nothing wrong with younger girls and boys wrestling." There are two nine-year-olds from local middle schools in the Tonawanda group.

**AS FAR AS EQUIPMENT** goes, Marilyn says that protective clothing right now is limited to covering the elbows and knees "so you don't get brush burns."

Whether or not women wrestlers would require special gear is debatable. "Like I say, we're opening up a whole new bag of tricks ... but we didn't run into very many problems with the girls wrestling on boys' terms."

The sport builds up strength and endurance, according to Marilyn. "But it's not just the physical aspect, it's the mental aspect, too. There's a lot to be learned from sports."

Women have traditionally missed out on these benefits because they were not encouraged,

and in fact often denied the opportunity, to play sports, she says. "Mentally, you can build confidence and endurance," Marilyn says. "Girls can benefit from this too — for example, if they enter the business world."

**THE NINE GIRLS** she's coaching are not out to prove anything, Marilyn says. "They actually wanted to wrestle." She adds, "The boys varsity team was really receptive ... they demonstrated moves for the girls."

Marilyn's husband, Glenn, a physical education teacher at Tonawanda High School, is coach of the varsity wrestling team, which has been undefeated for the past two years. And Marilyn admits, when it came to girls' wrestling, "I think Glenn was a little skeptical at first, but now he's become as enthusiastic as I am. All in all, he's been very supportive ... It's upsetting to me that everyone can't be that liberated about the whole thing."

What Marilyn is referring to is the fact that some parents,

administrators and other wrestling coaches are not pleased about girls getting into the sport. But she insists, "Wrestling is not just a sport for boys. Girls play soccer now, and that's supposed to be one of the roughest of all sports."

**SHE ENTERED** her girls in the Junior Wrestling Tournament at Tonawanda High School April 21, where they wrestled each other and "did quite well." There were four first place winners, three second place winners and two third place winners. Because they're pioneers, Marilyn told the girls before the tournament, "You're all winners."

Marilyn, mother of four-year-old Scott, who's already won a wrestling trophy of his own, plans to continue her education. A diabetic, she hopes to implement a counseling service for diabetics and their families. In the meantime, girls' wrestling is on her mind. She knows "everyone won't accept it right away," but she's determined to get it officially started.

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News Staff Photographer Ronald J. Collier

**IN WRESTLING, TECHNIQUE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BRAWN.** Here, Marilyn "Bo" Bateman works with members of Tonawanda High School's Girls' Wrestling, the first such team in the state. Marilyn, at center, shows moves to Pam Fuller, left, and Karen Brock. Observing are, from left: Shelley Davis, Renee Hall, Terry Nowatchik, Deb Oswald, Leslie Holt, Theresa Allen and Nikki LeVea.