

High School Wrestling REALLY Tough, Even Has Ban on Chewing Gum on Bus

By RUSS WORMAN
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While in high school and college Phil Persley was taught the fine points of basketball, baseball and football.

This explains, in part, how Persley became a wrestling coach. After participating in the three "major" sports (the quotes belong to Persley) he felt the need for a fourth outlet for energy and began flip-flopping classmates on the gym mats.

The young man who never took a wrestling lesson in his life now tries to hide his sentiments toward those other "necessary" sports by repeatedly stating: "I don't want to tear them down." But at the same time he is passionately occupied building up wrestling as the best mental and physical conditioner of all for interscholastic athletics.

For anyone with a doubt about the mat sport's tab as the "toughest of all", Vestal Central's peppy pilot can prove his point without even twisting a fact or a fibula, although it requires considerable ear-draining.

In what other sport, for example, would you find the training rule: "No chewing gum on the bus." And, where else but on the coarse cushions of the gym can a boy be developing all the muscles of his body while lying motionless and flat on his face.

The chewing gum rule can wait 'til later, but this business of fighting from the horizontal Persley calls the pre-requisite and also the end objective. Even more difficult than "getting the other guy down" is the task of keeping him down by sheer use of weight and wit.

That is where the successful 30-year-old coach begins the training routine. The little matter of "taking the opponent to mat" is virtually all instinct, not much different than boys fighting in the backyard.

To keep their opponents down Persley teaches his Golden Bears to shape themselves into tripods, a relatively simple little trick of putting your toes on the floor and resting the rest of your weight on the opponent. The tripod position permits easy shifting of the weight to follow the foe.

Completing the phases of basic training are the pinning holds and methods of escape. Persley exploded a theory when he got around to accounting for the mounting popularity of wrestling, as demonstrated by the annual turnout of more than 60 boys for the Vestal mat squad, not counting the hordes of junior highs and elementary pupils engaging in the sport.

"Why shouldn't it be popular?" Persley began with his typically boyish grin that subtracts a decade from his appearance. "I can take any boy in ninth grade with a fair measure of coordination and in 15 minutes show him all four requirements to wrestle. In three weeks I can have him winning most of his matches."

That popped the theory that boys who have learned to swing a bat, kick a football

and shoot basketball from childhood are hard to convert to a sport not practiced on the sandlots.

"Knowing those four points . . . takedown, holding, just one pin and one escape . . . a boy immediately begins to enjoy the sport," the coach explained.

For further evidence, Persley needed no prompting. "What's the reason for its popularity? It's a good sport and would prove popular anywhere. In wrestling boys compete according to size, while in football, basketball and even baseball, size is essential and only a few have a chance to make the varsity."

Still sermonizing, Persley pointed out "We have six weight classes under 138 pounds and the toughest bracket is around 127 and 133. At that weight they're too small for other sports. Why, even Chuck Rolles (Triple Cities' shining example of good basketball things in small packages) weighed more than that in high school."

Persley had a point there, but it was far from his last.

Contributing to the enjoyment for the participants is the system of eliminations through which the boys, not the coach, decide the starting lineup. "No one is cut from the squad," the coach stated, "and during practice periods all members of the team engage in wrestle-offs. The winners make up the varsity."

The fondness of wrestling courses way down to the third and fourth grades, where Persley claims, "the kids get a kick out of throwing each other around" and "learn techniques terrifically fast." Although he has nothing for disdain for professional "wrestling" (the quotes are shared this time by Persley and the writer), he permits the youngsters to stage tag team matches under the theory that if they enjoy the action they will continue to follow the sport.

All this would make it appear that all Persley has to do is stand on the sidelines and smile. The sport, however, requires close adult supervision to guard against injury. Wrestlers also must be taught specialties matching their physical capabilities, such as figure-fours and grapevines for long-legged boys, tight waistlocks for short, stocky boys, etc. Phil isn't a sideline-straddler. He gets down on the mat and wrestles his best pupils.

Not the least of Phil's worries is the weight of his best wrestlers; for he has learned that one cracker eaten before the weigh-in can put a boy over the weight limit and perhaps handicap the effort of an entire team. He also has discovered that boys chewing gum on the bus will gain a quarter-pound apiece between home and their destination.

The only other training re-



—Sunday Press Photo.

SLIPPING THE GRIP—Vestal coach Phil Persley (left) demonstrates a maneuver to JV Bill Howard, whose older brother, Jim, is Persley's top wrestling product to date. The Ithaca College 130-pounder is third-ranked nationally.

quirement is condition and most of the Vestal matmen voluntarily do roadwork, aware that poor condition may mean the loss of an intrasquad match and the loss of varsity position. Even in miserable weather they are sometimes seen jogging east on Route 17 as far as the Vestal Steak Shop.

The net result of Vestal's pioneering in the sport is best demonstrated by the fact that Persley never has had a manager last a full season. "They sit on the sidelines and watch the bouts and pretty soon want to wrestle," Persley said. "I lost six student managers that way this season and all of them are now on the squad."

Persley is too concerned with "selling" wrestling to other high schools to toot his own bugle but statistics tell an impressive story. His records over the last five years: 1950, 7-3; 1951, 7-2-1; 1952, 10-3; 1953, 11-2; 1954 thus far 10-2 with 1 to go.

That record qualifies as sensational when compared to a non-wrestling background. A native of Conklin Forks and graduate of North High (1941), Persley took his training to be a machine shop instructor at Oswego State, which in his years had only part-time wrestling in gym periods. Army infantry training included wrestling in crude form and while on the faculty at Callicoon he coached basketball and baseball.

At Vestal he claims he "backed into the job" when his predecessor transferred to another school.

For a last word on his favorite sport, Persley took a shot at the grunt and groaners on TV by holding them responsible for keeping many boys out of wrestling. "Many parents refuse their sons permission to wrestle in high school," Persley concluded, "because they don't like what is commonly known as wrestling on television."

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