



VARSITY EXTRA

Girls wrestling in Idaho has doubled. Is it time for their own state tournament?

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POCATELLO — Blackfoot High senior Lana Hunt has heard all the snide comments and snickers from opponents.

She's a three-time qualifier for the 4A state tournament, so they aren't really directed at her anymore. But as girls wrestling in Idaho grows, she hears them directed toward other girls and can only shake her head.

"Just because she's a girl doesn't mean she can't beat you," Hunt said. "She can be tough. She can hammer down on you just like you hammer down on her.

"It's all equal once you step on the mat."

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Hunt is just one of a growing throng of girls wrestling for Idaho's high school teams. The number remained mired in the teens in Idaho throughout the 2000s before jumping to 41 two years ago and 40 last year. This year, it spiked to 102 girls, said Ty Jones, the executive director of the Idaho High School Activities Association. And seven qualified for the state tournament, tying last year's record.

The increase has wrestling fans asking when Idaho will become the next state to add a separate state tournament.

A GROWING MOVEMENT

In Idaho and the majority of states, girls must wrestle against boys at the high school level. Only six states will host a separate state-sponsored tournament this winter: Hawaii, Texas, Washington, California, Alaska and Tennessee.

But girls wrestling is quickly gaining traction.

Oregon's and Georgia's state athletic associations voted this month to add a girls tournament next season. Colorado passed a two-year pilot program with eyes on its first sponsored state tournament in 2021. And Wisconsin is also weighing adding a girls-only tournament.

That growth in neighboring Washington and Oregon is spilling into Idaho. Post Falls sophomore Brelane Huber said she rarely saw another girl at a wrestling meet when she moved to Idaho five years ago, but she said she's finding more and more to compete with at regional and high school events.

"It's mostly because they see that it's possible," Huber said. "There were only a couple girls to start with, and everyone saw that they did well. It's not just a guys sport anymore."



MOST GIRLS ARE SCARED TO TRY IT, BECAUSE THEY KNOW IN IDAHO THEY'LL HAVE TO WRESTLE THE BOYS MOST OF THE TIME. BUT IF WE GET A SANCTIONED STATE TOURNAMENT, THERE WOULD BE SO MANY MORE.”

Lana Hunt, Blackfoot senior wrestler

A CATCH-22?

Idaho would struggle to hold a separate meet, with only 102 female wrestlers. But coaches believe that number would skyrocket once girls knew they didn't have to compete against boys.

"It's a Catch-22," said Bishop Kelly coach Travis Ribordy, who previously coached the boys and girls wrestling teams at Klein Oak High outside of Houston. "You're not going to get the girls that would take the chance to compete in this sport when they are wrestling guys that are just physically stronger than they are and know more. They are not willing to take that chance.

"It's a brutal sport. It's hand-to-hand combat. It's not fun for them to go out and get beaten every day knowing they are not going to be able to have the muscle mass to compete. When they're competing against other girls, now it's a fair match."

States with separate girls wrestling tournaments have shown that girls will flock to the sport once they can compete within their own gender.

Hawaii blazed the first trail in 1998, and Texas followed in 1999 when it sanctioned both boys and girls wrestling at the same time. Last year, 34 percent (562) of Hawaii's wrestlers were female, and the figure was 26 percent (4,140) in Texas. No other state in the country topped 20 percent, according to data from the National Federation of State High School Associations.

Girls made up 1.6 percent of Idaho's wrestlers in 2016-17.

The past decade saw Washington add girls wrestling in 2007, California in 2011, Alaska in 2014 and Tennessee in 2015. Each saw their girls wrestling population grow, but Washington remains the poster child. After fielding 208 female wrestlers in 2006, before sanctioning, the state had 1,514 last year, a 628 percent increase in 11 years.

IHSAA: MORE GROWTH IS NEEDED

Jones said that although more than doubling the number of female wrestlers in Idaho in a single year remains impressive and encouraging, the state activities association will need to see more before it adds a girls tournament.

Proponents first approached the IHSAA last year, but Jones said the association gave them the same response it gives those who want to add other sports to Idaho's roster: Grow the sport from the bottom up, not the top down.

“It’s always been a philosophy of our board you need to show growth first before we start adding things,” Jones said. “Because adding things costs money.”

Cross country followed a similar path before it successfully split its 2A and 1A state races two years ago after boosting the number of runners at the 1A level. And the IHSAA added swimming this school year after a 10-year process as it surpassed 1,000 swimmers. The IHSAA will sponsor the swimming tournament next fall, the first state tournament it has added since soccer in 2000.

A girls wrestling division wouldn’t represent a new sport, but Jones declined to put a number on how many female wrestlers Idaho would need before adding a separate tournament. Jones said too many questions remain unanswered, including how many wrestlers the state would need to support such a meet, how many classifications it would use, how many in each weight class would advance to state and how many weight classes would be needed.

States that came before Idaho have all followed similar paths. Washington, Tennessee and Alaska had fewer than 210 wrestlers before adding a tournament, while California had 1,493.

Five of the six states with girls wrestling have a single championship tournament open to wrestlers from all classifications. Only Texas splits its girls into two classifications.

All six states use 16-girl brackets, but Oregon will start with four-wrestler brackets next year.

And four of the six states mirror their boys tournaments with 14 weight classes, while Alaska uses eight and Tennessee 10.



WE WANT TO DO WHAT’S RIGHT FOR THE KIDS. AND I DON’T FEEL LIKE CO-ED WRESTLING IS RIGHT FOR THE SPORT.”

Travis Ribordy, Bishop Kelly coach

THE NEXT STEPS

With movement by the IHSAA likely years away, Columbia coach Todd Cady said it’s on the wrestling community to prove that girls wrestling is viable in Idaho. Columbia hosted the state’s first sanctioned girls-only tournament two weeks ago, drawing 41 wrestlers from Idaho, Oregon and Utah, including Hunt.

But that’s just a first step. Cady said the state needs not just one tournament, but one each month of the season to entice more girls to try the sport. As the director of the Rollie Lane Invitational, the Treasure Valley’s largest tournament, he said he’s considering adding a girls division.

“Those are things that if we’re serious about growing it, people are going to have to make those decisions and have the willingness to budge on their existing formats,” Cady said. “It’s something I definitely need to consider. It will affect the tournament in a certain way just on how we run it. But it’s the right thing to do if we want to give them their stage.”

Cady said Idaho also could follow Utah’s model, where USA Wrestling puts on a girls state tournament after the season outside of the purview of its state activities association. Oregon ran a girls exhibition tournament at the same time and alongside its boys state tournament before it unanimously approved a girls division this month.

Several years of a successful girls tournament could convince the IHSAA to adopt it and reward all the hard work that girls must dedicate to the sport.

“It’s one of those things where would creating the state tournament make it grow, or does it need to grow at the grass-roots level before you do that?” Post Falls coach Pete Reardon said. “I think it’s both.

“I think it needs to grow at the grass-roots level and get to a certain number, whatever it is. Then the state is able to say there’s enough interest that we can make this a sanctioned sport.”

TREASURE VALLEY STRUGGLING IN TEAM RACES

The Treasure Valley will have to dig itself out of a big hole in the team standings to claim a state title in any classification at this year’s state tournament.

Post Falls is running away with the 5A team race, finishing the first day of the tournament with 159.5 points, 63 ahead of Bonneville and Columbia.

Minico and Lakeland are battling for the 4A title. Minico leads 121.5-119.5. Caldwell is in sixth place with 54 points.

Sugar-Salem leads the 3A race with 134 points, 42.5 points ahead of Fruitland. New Plymouth is the Valley’s top team in 2A with 57 points, 19 points behind leader Ririe.

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GIRLS WRESTLING ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Idaho went from 40 female wrestlers to 102 this year. But the state has a long way to go to catch up to the country’s top girls wrestling states. Six of the eight host a girls-only state tournament, and Oregon will add a girls division next season.

State	Girls
California*	4,505
Texas*	4,140
Washington*	1,514
Hawaii*	562
Florida	358
Oregon	348
Tennessee*	294
Alaska*	271

* - Has a state-sponsored girls wrestling tournament.

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