

A record number of girls are wrestling in Kansas this year, but it's only the tip of the iceberg

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Hutchinson wrestlers Aracely Villegas and Maritza Jimenez are among the trailblazers paving the way for future female wrestlers in Kansas.

The girls are both honors students and first-year wrestlers in a season with a record number of girls pouring sweat and blood onto the mats. Still, officials believe the floodgates could still open for girl wrestlers if the Kansas State High Schools Activities Association approves sanctioned girls wrestling.

There are 14 states so far that have sanctioned girls wrestling.

For now, in Kansas, winning the unofficial state championship at McPherson in February is the top honor, unless a girl can beat out all the boys in her weight class.

It's never happened at the KHSAA state tournament. It's rare that a girl even qualifies for the tournament.

Salthawks hit the mat

Villegas, a senior, wrestles at the 106-pound class.

She's 4-foot-11 and her build reflects the years of weight lifting she's done with wrestling coach Michael Garcia, who also teaches strength

training.

Garcia has coached wrestling for 36 years. The first girl he remembers coaching was Amber Sparks in the late 2000s. He's had a girl or two on his team each year ever since.

Garcia asked Villegas to wrestle to fill in the lightest weight class.

"She just has that attitude that you want a wrestler to have," Garcia said, adding wrestlers need to have a little bit of cockiness and "a little bit of gladiator in them."

Villegas went home and asked her mother if she could wrestle.

"My mom was like 'I'm gonna watch them beat you up,'" Villegas said, sweating as she tried to catch her breath in between 30-second practice matches against Jimenez and Brett Hamel. "Ok, I am gonna beat them up."

She was 9-1 against girls and 6-7 against boys as of Saturday. The latter includes 4-4 against boys on varsity.

Villegas said she pinned one girl in 14 seconds.

"It would have been faster if the ref got down," she said.

Villegas runs track as well but said wrestling practice is much tougher.

Jimenez also got the OK from her mother. The sophomore worked as a wrestling manager the last couple of years before deciding to put down the scorecard and put on wrestling shoes.

Villegas gives up 20 pounds to wrestle Jimenez, but still they end up wrestling against each other since it's the closest weight to her.

"They are both really good athletes, very coachable," Garcia said. "Bottom line is their competitors and they go out to compete."

Jimenez was 8-1 against girls and 1-8 against boys so far this season.

Her only loss to a girl came at the hands of Mya Kretzer, of McPherson.

Changing the landscape

USA Wrestling ranks the McPherson senior as No. 9 in the country for high school girls in the 127-pound class.

On Jan. 7, she announced via Twitter her intent to wrestle for Baker University next year. It will be the second year of the women's program at Baker University where Cody Garcia is the coach.

Cody Garcia is a former three-time state champion for Hutchinson and the son of Salthawk coach Michael Garcia.

Cody approached Villegas about possibly wrestling for Baker University as well. She's still considering it, but also wants to run track in college.

Jimenez hasn't thought out far enough about whether she wants to wrestle in college. She does plan to keep wrestling through high school.

Mya's father, Doug Kretzer, is the McPherson High School wrestling

coach and has been the big pusher behind having sanctioned matches for girls.

Doug is the state women's representative for the Kansas Wrestling Coaches Association.

He became a proponent for girls having their own class a few years ago after finding out his daughter was serious about her wrestling career.

At first, he worried about boys trying to make a statement when they wrestled his daughter.

He still has concerns for her well-being.

"I'm not a big fan of it, I don't think it's a win, win," Doug said, adding it's humiliating for a guy to lose to a girl, but expected when he wins. "If they have no option, then a boy is better than nothing at all."

Doug said there will be more options if the KHSAA approves a proposal before them in April. Then, he said competitors will come from other sports to prove they are the best in the state.

Missouri approved sanctioned girls wrestling last year. Doug said Missouri had 171 girls wrestling before that approval. This season, they have 866 girls wrestling.

"We'll get em when they can be rewarded for their accomplishments," he said.

High school girl wrestlers went from 804 in 1994 to 16,562 in 2018, the National Wrestling Coaches Association stated.

The landscape is already starting to change in Kansas.

McPherson held the state's first tournament for girls in 2017 and an unsanctioned state tournament later that season.

Doug said Kansas had four tournaments for girls that year and 112 girls wrestling. In 2018, there were six tournaments and 215 wrestlers. This year, there is a record 376 girls wrestling and 15 scheduled tournaments, he said.

"You're basically seeing an explosion now that girls have the opportunity to compete against girls," Doug said.

Doug said girls don't compete against boys in basketball or baseball and in golf, they have their own tee.

"It's not like when the wrestling match starts they give them a five-point lead," Doug said, adding that the physical differences in males versus females makes it unfavorable to wrestle against each other.

As a senior, Villegas squatted 225 pounds, benched 140 pounds and hang clinged 180 pounds. All three are records — the first two were held by her coach's daughter, Sheena — in the 114-pound weight class for girls at Hutchinson.

But the lifts are not nearly enough to compete with her male counterpart.

"Whether it's an official state tournament or not ... every girl wants to win that championship and say I am the best wrestler in the state," Doug said. "I can't stress enough how much of a trailblazer these girls

are. That takes an almost unbreakable spirit to say I want to do this."

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