



Oklahoma town can't fathom Olympics without wrestling

Friday Posted Feb 22, 2013 at 12:01 AM
Updated Feb 22, 2013 at 9:23 PM

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By JUSTIN JUOZAPAVICIUS

This Oklahoma prairie town expects three things from its boys: Go to church, earn good grades in school and win a state championship in wrestling.

Perry is a place that eats, sleeps and breathes wrestling. A rebuilding year is one when the Perry Maroons only take state by a few points. Former coach John Divine, whose name is on the high school gym, used to tell his boys: "I'm behind you 100 percent — win or draw." And when current coach Ronnie Delk was being considered for the job a couple years ago, he had to explain to the local newspaper why he was the best man for the position because he was an outsider — the first non-Perry alumni since the 1930s to lead the team.

So it has hit residents here particularly hard that the executive board of the International Olympic Committee recently voted to cut the sport from the 2020 Olympics. USA Wrestling, joined by its international counterparts, has since pledged to try to stop the committee from going through with its decision, but whether they can successfully lobby for a reversal is uncertain at best.

“I never dreamed they’d take it out,” said Danny Hodge, a local legend who won a silver medal at the 1956 Olympics and, at 80 years old, can still crush an apple in his vise-grip of a right hand. “It means so much for the kids, and now they can’t go. I never thought the committee would take out the world’s oldest sport.”

Hodge, who remembers training for his beloved sport by jogging with a brick in each hand, explains that while other nationally-promoted and better-televised sports have professional leagues and championship games athletes hope to win, going to an Olympics is the pinnacle event for a wrestler.

“It’s a shock,” he said in his living room, dozens of medals and accolades nearby.

The central Oklahoma town of around 5,200, where the major employer is the headquarters of Ditch Witch trenching machines, seems to exist for a singular purpose: breeding championship-caliber wrestling teams. It’s difficult to find someone here who didn’t wrestle, or isn’t related to or friends with a wrestler past or present. Unlike other high schools across Oklahoma and the country that emphasize football or basketball, wrestling is king here, and boasts its own homecoming celebration and royalty court. Some kids here start training as young as five or six.

“Every boy in this town wants to wear this singlet,” said Delk, holding up a maroon wrestling uniform.

Scott Chenoweth, a time-state champion at Perry and former coach who led the Maroons to 12 state championships during his tenure and is now school superintendent, described the lofty goals he remembers when he was wrestling here in the mid-1980s:

“It’s always expected it’s going to be Perry vs. X for state,” he says. “That’s when it gets rough.”

Since 1961, Perry has never gone more than two years without winning a state title. It placed second last year, and that trophy sits in dishonor on a metal folding chair at the entrance to the team’s training room, greeting the boys before each practice.

The school's impressive run boasts nearly 40 state championships since 1952, including six straight in the 1960s, 11 in a row from 1971-1981 and eight of the last nine.

Delk said the Maroons are considered the underdogs at this weekend's state finals, but a smile quickly curls across his lips, suggesting he knows something every other coach doesn't: This is Perry, after all, of course they'll pull it off.

Before one of the team's three daily practices, Perry wrestlers described the potential loss of their sport in the Olympics like they would the death of a teammate.

"That hurts. It kind of shoots down your dreams," said senior team captain Austin Allen, 19, who has put his ambitions of wrestling in college on hold for now because of the IOC's decision.

Senior Tevin Williams, 18, who placed a note by his alarm clock this season reminding him that he's "training to be a state champion like there's no tomorrow," described the decision as "heartbreaking."

"That prestige, to say 'I'm the best in the world,' is gone," Williams said.

Mark Kirk, who graduated from Perry High School in 1975 and was state runner-up that year, wrote a 200-page book, *The Maroon Dynasty*, chronicling the school's incredible run. He said he was "devastated" to hear of the IOC's decision, but offered an optimistic outlook on the sport's endurance — especially in places like Perry, Okla.

"It's a passion for people," Kirk said. "The hardcore wrestlers and wrestling fans are always going to be there. It never is going to fade away."

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