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Taking it to the mat

Wildcat Athletics adds men's and women's wrestling as new winter sports

By Eric A. Howald

For the first time in 35 years – the first time ever for women – Linfield student-athletes are donning singlets and wrestling shoes. University officials announced the return of men's and women's wrestling in October 2021 and hired former Pac-12 wrestling champion Chad Hanke to lead the programs shortly thereafter. The teams, which will begin competition in the 2022-23 season, represent the first new sports at Linfield since the addition of women's lacrosse in 1997.

"Linfield hasn't had a new sport in 25 years, and we thought long and hard about why this is the right time for wrestling," said Linfield Athletic Director Garry Killgore. "Oregon is a hotbed of women's wrestling, which the NCAA has designated as one of its emerging sports. But the Pacific Northwest is also a region that lacks enough college wrestling opportunities for men. We will be recruiting hard to bring these student-athletes to Linfield."

A coach with local roots, national successes

Hanke grew up in Dayton, where he was a three-time high school state champion. He attended Oregon State University, where he went on to be a two-time NCAA qualifier and conference champion for the Beavers. He had a 35-5 record as a senior and was ranked as high as No. 4 in the country.

After graduating in 2014, Hanke went on to assistant Division I coaching positions at Oregon State University, American University and Cal State-Bakersfield.

"We want to create more opportunities for Oregon's high school wrestlers to access four-year higher education, the same way I did," Hanke said.

His goal is to attract 10 new Linfield students for each wrestling squad by next fall – something Hanke started working on before he even had an on-campus office or a Linfield computer.

"There is a lot of talent in high school wrestling in the region, but not enough opportunities to continue in the sport close to home," Hanke said. "Now, Linfield will be one of the places where students can get a great education while competing in a sport they are passionate about."

A growing sport with much demand

Wildcat wrestling is not entirely new; Linfield sponsored an NAIA-level wrestling program that ended in the 1980s. But questions from prospective students regarding wrestling opportunities at Linfield have risen consistently in recent years, according to the Office of

Admission. The demand was there.

The NCAA considers wrestling as one of the top sports in terms of attracting first-generation students – a group that makes up roughly one-third of Linfield's current student population.

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– Miles K. Davis, Linfield President

FIRST ON THE MAT: Abram Nelson '24 (left) started Linfield's club wrestling team in 2020. Chad Hanke (center) was hired to lead the club and intercollegiate programs. Carissa Love '23 (right) was the first women's wrestler to join the club and the first woman to win a college match for Linfield.



ident Miles K. Davis said. “The addition of men’s and women’s wrestling fits right in with our growth trajectory.”

A major win for college wrestling

A statewide organization called Restore College Wrestling Oregon (RCWOR) is happy with this growth trajectory. Leaders of the group, which also helped lobby for new wrestling programs at Eastern Oregon University and Corban University, raised money to help defray startup costs for Linfield’s program. The organization also paid for Linfield’s first new competition wrestling mat.

Doug Caffall, RCWOR’s president, and Larry Bielenberg, an NCAA All-American and former heavyweight national champion for Oregon State, both have Linfield ties and have been championing the effort for years.

“Linfield’s decision to bring back wrestling is a major win for the sport of college wrestling and for Oregon as a whole,” said Bielenberg, whose daughter and son-in-law are Linfield alumni. “Linfield’s restoration holds a lot of weight for other colleges and universities.”

Linfield and Pacific University in Forest Grove will be the only NCAA Division III wrestling programs in the Northwest. The new Wildcat programs will fill out much of their regular-season schedule with regional opponents from NAIA and NCAA Division I and II schools.

Grassroots efforts lead to top 10 dreams

Until then, Hanke is coaching a student-led men’s and women’s wrestling club at Linfield. The club was approved by ASLU in the fall of 2020, but then wasn’t allowed to compete during the pandemic year. In the fall of 2021, club members went to work building a program even before they learned of the NCAA program announcement.

The students arranged for the donation of mats from McMinnville and Newberg high schools, worked with other university clubs to make a competition schedule, fundraised to pay for travel and referee costs and even designed their own singlets.

They had their first competition, and Linfield’s first wrestling of any kind since the mid-1980s, November 20, 2021, at the Big Bend Scramble in Moses Lake, Washington. Among the winners that day was Carissa Love ’23, who pinned an opponent from Washington State University to become the first woman in Linfield

history to have her hand raised following a wrestling match.

“Programs like Linfield’s are key to returning Oregon to its status as a small-college wrestling powerhouse,” said Caffall, who is the son of one Linfield graduate and the father of two others. “There is tremendous potential for expansion in Oregon and throughout the Pacific Northwest.”

Hanke agrees with that, but says he’s focused more squarely on making Linfield a small-college powerhouse in its own right.

“All the building blocks are here to be great,” Hanke said. “There’s no reason men’s and women’s wrestling can’t be as much of a dynasty as Linfield football or softball – a top-10 team every year built around a steady stream of All-Americans. That’s our goal.”

U.S. national team member signs on as assistant coach

The first time Alyssa Lampe reported for work at Linfield, she was sporting a black eye – courtesy of a practice with the Oregon State men’s wrestling team.



A six-time member of the U.S. women’s national team and two-time world bronze medalist, Lampe still works out three mornings a week in Corvallis with an eye toward the 2024 Olympic Games. She’s also thrilled to be the assistant coach for Linfield’s new wrestling program.

“What an exciting time to be at Linfield, and an exciting time for wrestling in the Northwest,” Lampe said. “I’m especially motivated to recruit and train the first women wrestlers in school history. We’re going to build a program all of Linfield can be proud to call its own.”

The Tomahawk, Wisconsin, native claimed the bronze medal at the World Championships in 2012 and 2013, and was a member of Team USA from 2009 to 2016. She qualified for the team again in 2021 and is currently ranked No. 3 in the nation at the 110-pound/50 kilogram division.

WRESTLING LIKE A WILDCAT: Jakob Jarvis '24 transferred to Linfield from Clackamas Community College, where he was a member of the 2021 NJCAA national championship team and was named an Academic All-American.