

IKWF Open indicates that wrestling is on the rise in Illinois

The Illinois Kids' Wrestling Federation held its annual Kids' Open in December at the Bank of Springfield Center, and if the participation showed anything, Illinois wrestling is not only alive and well, but continues to gain popularity and provide numerous opportunities for all wrestlers to improve and grow.

This year's Open welcomed 1,412 wrestlers participating across two divisions and this year's total was the second highest number of athletes wrestling in the past five years as 2018 event drew 1,608.

"After the unfortunate shutdown of wrestling in our state by the Governor, participation in our great sport has rebounded," said Jim Considine, president of the IKWF and chairman of Illinois/USAW.

The event offered an Elite Division and the Open Division. The Elite was broken down into Intermediate, Novice and Senior Elite. The Open Division provided more areas for experience-appropriate wrestling. There was the growing Girls Division, as well as the traditional Bantam, Intermediate, Novice and Senior Division.

In the Elite Division, 333 wrestlers stepped onto the mat with the most participants enrolled in the Senior Elite Division. Conversely, in the Open Division, Bantam saw the highest participation with 312 wrestlers toeing the line and for the girls in the Open Division, 140 participants entered and wrestled out of the 1,079 total wrestlers. This meant that Illinois wrestling was continuing to build at the youth level, as well as soar in popularity amongst girls as their division continues to add more wrestlers each year.

"From a very few girl wrestlers to our current growing numbers, I am very encouraged as I believe our numbers will continue to grow." Considine commented. "Regarding Bantam's numbers, we lost retention with this age group with the shutdown of wrestling in Illinois. But these numbers show with wrestling back in full swing, we are drawing more young wrestlers to our great sport."

The Open was a one-day tournament that housed 24 mats and had 50 officials on hand to conduct the matches. This year the tournament ran as smoothly as ever with the Open Division completed by 3 p.m., and the Elite wrestling was done by 4 p.m. This Open always takes place over the Martin Luther King holiday weekend, so parents and fans find it not only accessible, but worthy enough to make a weekend out of it.

With this, Illinois wrestling is back on the rise and it will not be long before the state's greatest sport exceeds previous years' participation as wrestling in the Land of Lincoln is back to its high standards.

State Champs Linked to Team Illinois

Some of the better wrestlers in the country have been coming out of Illinois over the past 25 years, and, like most of those past Illinois champions, several current champions have found success at the Fargo Nationals and overseas as well. Over the two recent weekends, Illinois crowed 56 individual state champions between all three boys' classifications and the girls' division. In that, several of the champions crowned have ties to not only their communities, but to Team Illinois and Team USA as well.

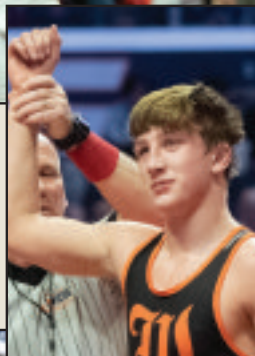
Team Illinois, which credits the club and high school coaches in Illinois for the development of its wrestlers, has been the model of consistency and winning for many other states when it comes to how the IKWF runs its youth programs, as well as how Team Illinois approaches Fargo. Because of this, the Illinois experience for the wrestlers and the coaches has been

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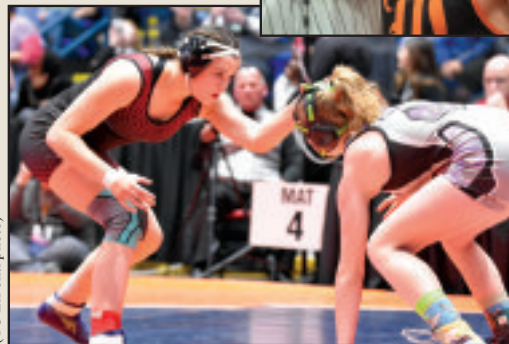


(Wes Tharp photo)

Illinois state champions Nasir Bailey (top), Kannon Webster (right) and Sydney Perry (below left) all had ties to Team Illinois.



(Wes Tharp photo)



(TC LiFonti photo)

one that has enriched the lives of those who embrace the opportunities provided by these organizations. Therefore, it is generally no surprise that state success is connected to national and world success.

Some of the more notable champions crowned in Illinois this year were World champion Dom Munarretto (St. Charles East), as well as now four-time state champions Nasir Bailey (Rich Township) and Sergio Lemley (Chicago Mt. Carmel). In addition to these three young men, national champions and three-time state champions Kannon Webster (Washington) and Ben Davino (St. Charles East) also added to their medal collection.

As for others who have had Fargo success in the Olympic styles, a large number reached the top of the podium at state in folkstyle, some of the more notable being Massey Odiotto (Loyola), two-time champions Seth Mendoza (Chicago-Mt. Carmel), Anthony Ruzic (Auburn) and Jayden Colon (St. Charles East), as well as now three-time state champion Dillan Johnson (Joliet Catholic).

Also, Morgan Turner (Bremen) became the first female wrestler to place at this year's boys tournament. She placed third in 2A at 106 pounds.

On the girls' side, World silver medalist Gabriella Gomez won her second state title, while Valerie Hamilton (El Paso-Gridley), another World silver medalist, bumped up one weight class in the state series with an eye to compete against World fifth-place

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finisher Sydney Perry (Batavia). Perry won a very high-level and exciting bout in the final seconds with a takedown and putting Hamilton to her back for a 7-4 win and her second state title.

Other two-time state champions who have found great success on the national level were Angelina Cassioppi (Hononegah) and Cadence Diduch (Freeport). In addition, notable Fargo All-Americans who claimed a state title were Harlee Hiller (Loyola), Mackenzie Pratt (Edwardsville), and Kiara Ganey (Belleville East). State runner-up Alexandra Sebek (Oak Forest) was also a Fargo All-American last summer.

All these young ladies have been involved in the sport long before Illinois had sanctioned a division for them, but their time, travel, work and dedication is now paying off immensely.

Blackburn and Illinois Wesleyan add wrestling

In official statements released by both Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill., and Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill., men's and women's wrestling will be added to each of these colleges to not only help grow the sport, but to also attract new and more diverse students to their schools.

Blackburn is resurrecting a wrestling program that was discontinued in the 1980s and they are doing so by hiring a man who needs no introduction in the state of Illinois.

Chris Whelan, whose list of accolades is as long as it is impressive, is a former state champion from Granite City North High School who then went on to be a two-time All-American at Missouri, graduating in 1983. After his competition days ended, Whelan stayed at Missouri and coached. He also served as the head coach for the men's and women's wrestling team in Great Britain from 1994 to 1997, as well as leading the SIUE wrestling program. Whelan is an Illinois and National Hall of Fame inductee, as well as a University of Missouri Hall of Fame member.

Whelan believes that "This is a great opportunity for our future student-athletes, not only for the state of Illinois, but nationwide as well."

Similarly, Illinois Wesleyan also added men's and women's wrestling for the upcoming 2023-24 season to build its enrollment and offer a wider variety of activities to attract a more diverse group of students.

IWU ended its men's program in 1985 after having had a team for 23 years. Now, 38 years later, that program will be revitalized with the addition of a women's program as well.

"We are committed to building programs that will compete for conference and national championships as the two sports add to our strong athletic history," said Illinois Wesleyan athletic director Mike Wagener in a statement released by the university.

Along with the addition of these two programs, in- and out-of-state students can now choose between 20 different Illinois schools ranging between Division I, II, III, as well as junior colleges that offer wrestling and strong academic opportunities. ■