



Are wrestlers today different than the past?

Kids are just different. I heard this recently from a college coaching friend of mine. I gave that statement, which we hear so often, some additional thought and asked a couple more coaches in the trenches their thoughts on coaching today's wrestlers.

Are kids different than they used to be? Are they as tough as they used to be? Is the task of getting an entire team to perform at a high level harder or more complex than in the past?

The answer, in these coaches' opinions: yes and no.

Kids are vastly different today than they've ever been before. But coaches still have the opportunity to impact their wrestlers, their perspectives and can shape their futures. Coaches have the formidable task of creating a culture of hard work, where the grind of a wrestling season can be valued and enjoyed; despite the obvious physical pain of the process.

One college coach whose perspective I really respect is Minnesota State-Mankato's Jim Makovsky. The Mavericks head man is in his 16th year at the perennial Division II powerhouse and was my brother's college coach. Mankato recently finished third



Minnesota State-Mankato's Jim Makovsky, in his 16th year, works to teach his wrestlers to value hard work and savor the memories of the journey.

at the National Duals.

"I had a guy tell me, 'It doesn't feel like I have a life, working out all the time and going to class.' I said, 'Buddy, that's called life. That's called living.' I'm trying to get across to these guys to appreciate what they have. Because when it's gone, they're going to miss it."

Makovsky said wrestlers have high goals set for themselves, and know it's going to take a lot of hard work to get there. But more than ever, they get quickly distracted.

"It's hard to remember that your initial goal is to drain the swamp when you're waist deep in alligators," he said. "There are so many distractions compared to even 10 years ago...500 TV channels, cell phones, computers, Facebook, e-mail and text messages. But I think they'd go through withdrawal without that. There's so many distractions that it's hard to focus. But on one hand that's a cop out for kids to use that as an excuse."

The distractions are a reality for many coaches, both on the high school and college level. Coaches try to talk to their wrestlers about elevating their performance to upend their rival in a dual that starts in an hour. The next thing they know one of their wrestlers is checking a text message that just came in from his girlfriend.

Coaches need to have a vastly different strategy than before. Coaches need to understand kids' world today and the complexity of it. They need to have the ability to show kids that something as difficult as becoming a great wrestler will take a lot of time. They are liv-

ing in the day and age of immediate gratification. The world is at their fingertips with the media and communication advances of the last 10 years.

Wrestling, on the other hand, is a long journey with a great reward at the end if you stick with it. Coaches need to remind their kids of that often. And encourage them to embrace that and savor the journey.

As I look back at my wrestling career, I know a huge part of the work ethic I have today comes from my high school wrestling program. Working hard and putting

in extra time was the cool thing to do.

Even in junior high, I had a group of wrestling buddies who did extra running and training with the high school team because we wanted to be like them. That happened because there was a culture of hard work that was embraced. Kids complained about it sometimes, but everyone knew that was what it took to get to the top. That perspective continued through my high school years in our program.

Now as an adult, when I get put into situations

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— Mankato's Jim Makovsky

that really test my resolve or I'm forced to take work output to another level, I can do it. My body and mind have been down that road before and I know it's possible.

Cornell coach Rob Koll agreed that kids are different, but thinks many coaches quickly forget what things were like when they were younger. Koll is widely respected by his peers and now in his 20th year at the New York school. Koll's troops recently made the Duals finals before losing to Iowa 23-13.

"Things haven't changed. People who are saying it have," Koll said. "I heard it when my Dad was coaching. I hear people complaining about their kids not being tough. I think a lot of it comes down to us

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thinking too highly of ourselves. None of us were that good. There was only one Cael Sanderson. We all lost and we all made mistakes.

"I have to remind that to my coaches. You need a little more empathy for your wrestlers."

For many kids, mowing lawns in the summer or early-morning paper routes are a thing of the past. But some of them have had to learn to work within the context of their sport.

Upper-end kids in wrestling have learned to train year-round because that's the direction most sports are going. If they're going to keep up with their peers who are going to national-level tournaments and camps, they need to be doing the same thing. Wrestling becomes more than just a seasonal sport. It wasn't as much that way 10 or 20 years ago.

In the end, high school and wrestling programs are getting some kids who understand the big picture of wrestling better than in the past. Coaches need to encourage those motivated kids as their team leaders and then create situations where the other wrestlers in the program look up to those leaders.

Koll said high school coaches really have a tougher job in this regard than college coaches. College coaches get to pick the kids they want. High school coaches have to play the hand they're dealt in terms of the kids in their room.

Koll stressed high school coaches need to take the long-term approach as well. They need to get good people involved helping out with the feeder program and junior high program to show kids what it means to work hard. And over time, that culture of work will snowball and you'll see the benefits on the high school mats.

Makovsky, known for pushing his team quite hard, said that wrestlers will often look back and fondly remember the things they dreaded when they were wrestling. Long road trips or that watershed practice where the team was pushed past where they'd ever been before is what wrestlers, and athletes in general, miss once it's done.

In closing, coaches, creating a positive atmosphere where hard work is embraced is a steep task. But with the appropriate perspective on where kids are coming from, it can be done. Thank you for all you do for our sport. You are making a difference that will impact your wrestlers' lives for years to come.

If you're struggling with a particular athlete or situation in your program, drop me an e-mail. We'll pass those questions along to coaches who regularly contribute to WIN like Dan Gable and Greco coach Steve Fraser. We'll publish as many of their answers in the magazine as possible.

Best of luck with the remainder of your season.

(Bryan Van Kley is the publisher of WIN Magazine and can be reached at Bryan@WIN-magazine.com.) ■

Letters/E-mails to the Editor

Another small-school fan

Dear Mr Klingman: You had a great article in the (Dec. 22, 2008) WIN about "adopting unknown programs." The premise is pretty simple: find a school with a wrestling team and become a fan. But go beyond that. Buy their wrestling gear. If they don't have any, pony up some money and get a T-shirt or a cap designed.

I'm picking Grand View because it is in Iowa and is a first-year program. Others might pick Cal Baptist because they are also new or Baker University (Kansas) because they start up next year. Heck, be really unique and support the Jamestown College women's teams. This "adoption" is a great idea. I'm a life-long Hawkeye fan from Cedar Rapids, but I'm considering picking Baker because I lived in Kansas for five years.

— Gregg Dinderman, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Looking for a score

Dear Mike: I love the magazine. I've been a subscriber for a number of years now, and as a matter of fact, just renewed for two more years. I don't want you to think I'm being a jerk by asking about this. My question is in the Dec. 8th issue, on page 71 of the results section, you have a picture of (Iowa's) Dan Dennis wrestling (Iowa Central's) Billy Murphy. But you don't have the result of who won the match. I'm sure it's just an oversight and maybe to some people the result and score doesn't matter. But to a wrestling nut like myself, the curiosity is killing me. Could you please send me the winner and score. Thanks in advance.

— Dave Jackson, St. Louis, Mo.

(Comment: Sorry Dave, especially since that weight class (133 pounds) has become a drama. As you know, Dennis sat out last year with a broken jaw and was replaced by Joey Slaton, who finished second nationally. But then Slaton struggled this year, which gave Dennis another shot to start. And who does he face? Murphy, who also could be wrestling at that weight for Iowa after spending one year with the Hawkeyes. Murphy is now with Iowa Central (check out the story in this issue on page 71), but lost to Dennis that day in November, 4-2.) ■

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