

Fox Valley wrestling powers Freedom, Kaukauna, Seymour and Wrightstown depend on program continuity, longtime coaches for success

You've heard of the Bermuda Triangle — where boats and planes mysteriously get swallowed up and vanish without a trace?

But have you ever heard of the Fox Valley's Wrestling Triangle?

Draw a line on a map from Kaukauna to Freedom up to Seymour then over to Wrightstown and back to Kaukauna and it forms a triangle of sorts.

Opposing high school wrestling teams that enter that area suffer similar fates but, unlike the Bermuda Triangle, there's an explanation for this one.

It starts with tradition, built on years of success stemming from stable coaching staffs, good junior and middle school programs and a strong backbone of parent support.

Due to those factors, Kaukauna has been a dominant force in Fox Valley Association wrestling since the mid-1980s. Freedom has been the team to beat since the inception of the Valley 8, which evolved into the Eastern Valley Conference. Before that, the Irish battled with Wrightstown in the Olympian, in which the Tigers continue to rule supreme. Seymour has been one of the top teams in the Bay Conference for many years.

Is it just coincidence that these four prep wrestling super powers are so close to each other? Is there something in the water?

Neither.

The main common denominator is all four schools have coaches who have been around for a long time and work together with their feeder programs, along with kids who buy into their systems.

Going into this season, the head coaches at the schools have a combined 101 years of experience. Seymour's Keith Swett is the dean of the quartet with 36 years, followed by Wrightstown's Bill Verbeten with 31. Kaukauna's Jeff Matczak and Freedom's Mike Buechler are the "new" kids on the block, each with 17 years behind them.

However, with Matczak and former co-coach Steve McDaniel, the Ghosts have had the same brain trust for nearly 30 years. Buechler and his predecessor, Steve Belknap, are the only wrestling coaches Freedom has had in the last 31 years. Among the four, they have 1,332 dual-meet wins, compared to just 290 losses and their teams have won 46 championships.

All four coaches directed their teams to conference championships last season and all four teams are state-ranked again this season by Wisconsin Wrestling Online. Kaukauna is ranked No. 2 in Division 1, while in Division 2; Freedom is No. 7, Wrightstown is No. 10 and Seymour No. 11.

"Staffs have to stay stable," said Swett. "The three of us (he and his assistants) have worked together for more than 20 years and almost all of the high school coaches are former Seymour wrestlers. We are almost ready to coach the grandsons of my first team."

Conversely, teams without established staffs are more likely to struggle, according to Matczak.

"Programs are built by coaches who stay with the program for many years," he said. "I can't think of a wrestling program that is perennially state-ranked that has had four or five different coaches over the past 20 years. On the other hand, many programs that are struggling have been a revolving door in terms of coaching."

Just as important are the assistant coaches, according to Buechler.

"Good coaches surround themselves with good people," Buechler said. "Who are going to be the people who are going to do the best job running the youth program? Everybody has to see eye-to-eye. You don't have a few of these fly-by-night parents, who want to grab four or five kids and that's their team. It's a program-first type of attitude. I think that makes a big difference."

There's interaction between the schools as well. Wrightstown is a charter member of the Cheesehead Invitational, hosted annually by Kaukauna. Seymour, Kaukauna and Freedom all compete in the Pulaski Invitational, which Kaukauna won last season and Seymour placed second. For many years, Kaukauna also competed in the Irish Invitational and, until a few years ago, Freedom and Wrightstown wrestled a dual meet even though they were no longer in the same conference.

Last season, Kaukauna was the only team that qualified for team state, at which it made the semifinals. Together, the schools sent 20 to the individual state tournament last year and brought home eight medals. Kaukauna led with eight qualifiers (two champions, one second and one third); Seymour had six (one third and one fourth), Freedom four (second and fourth) and Wrightstown, which was in a bit of a lull, just two.

This year, all four teams are off to good starts again. Kaukauna is 8-0 in duals, going 5-0 to win its own multi-dual tournament. Freedom is 9-0, having won the Seymour Duals, where it beat the host 37-26. Wrightstown is 3-0 in duals and won the Little Chute Invitational for the 20th year in a row. Seymour is just breaking even so far at 4-4, but all four losses were to other state-ranked teams in Freedom, Pulaski, Oconto Falls and Luxemburg-Casco.

It may seem like it, but these teams don't intentionally try to outdo one another. But they do inspire each other to improve.

"As teams around you step up, you want to step up just as much," said Buechler. "I don't know if you actually look at it like, 'Kaukauna's getting really good, we better do more,' but it's definitely there. I think anybody, whether you actually dual them or meet them head to head, someone who is that close to you is an automatic rival of yours."

Strong feeder programs — both junior and grade and middle school — are also stepping-stones to success as long as they work together.

"A strong feeder program is a must," said Matczak. "Some youth programs define success by how many state champions they produce, but the high school program can't retain them. A youth program that runs independently from the high school program is not a feeder program."

At Seymour, wrestling is so important varsity athletes carry the message to the younger grades at practices, meets and even in the classroom.

"We send high school kids to middle school practices and we attend some middle school meets as a team," said Swett, a nationally recognized Greco-Roman coach, whose Masters thesis proved the correlation between wrestling and academic performance as measured by grades, attendance and graduation. "High school wrestlers take our highlight tape to ninth grade classes and recruit."

The one trait that Verbeten sees in his peers is that none of them will turn anybody away and all of them strive to do the best they can for their wrestlers on and off the mat.

"Wrestling is a lot like life," Verbeten said. "There are times you aren't going to get that job, but the harder you work, good things happen and I believe all four of us are willing to give up anything to help kids do their best. When you talk to Matchy (Matczak), Swett or Mike, you can tell it in their voice they just want to help the kids."



Freedom wrestling coach Mike Buechler (left) works on a move with wrestler Jared Reimer during practice. (Post-Crescent photo by Patrick Ferron)

PIN NUMBERS

KAUKAUNA

Head coach: Jeff Matczak

Conference championships since 1993: 11

Total team championships: 14

FVA champs since 1993: 72

FVA champs total: 121

State qualifiers since 1993: 81

Total state qualifiers: 108

Total state place-winners: 47

Team state appearances: Nine times since 1995, runner-up in 2000, 2003, 2008

Individual state champions: Nine (Dave Viaene, 1983, hwt.; Joe Vanevenhoven, 2000, 119; Justin Geitner, 2001, 140; Nate Van Schyndel, 2006, 130; Joe Budi, 2007-08, 189; Dillon Bera, 2008, 145; Eric Vanevenhoven, 2009, 152; Noah Budi, 2009, 160)

SEYMOUR

Co-head coaches: Keith Swett and Mark Schmoll

Number of conference championships: Six

Regional champions: 87

Sectional champions: 25

State place-winners: 31

Team state appearances: None.

Individual state champions: One (Paul Leisgang, 1986, 98)

FREEDOM

Head coach: Mike Buechler

Number of conference championships: 16

Individual conference champions: 104

Regional championships: 12

State place-winners 53

Team state appearances: Three times since 1997, champions 1997.

Individual state champions: Nine (Troy Brockman, 1989, 140; Darin Tiedt, 1989, 171; Bruce Van Rossum, 1994, 145; Bill Lowney 1996, 152 and 1998, 171;

Garrett Lowney 1997, 189; '98, 275; Darren Van Camp 2000, 130; Cole Konrad 2003, 275)

WRIGHTSTOWN

Co-head coaches: Bill Verbeten and Matt Verbeten

Number of conference championships: 13

Individual conference champions: 121

State place-winners 55

State qualifiers: 93

Team state appearances: Nine times since 1995, champions in 1999, 2005, 2006.

Individual state champions: Six (Pat Verbeten, 1989, 152; Eric Verbeten 2002, 152; Chris Klister 2004, 112, '05, 119; Casey Klister, 2005, 125; Mitch Nooyen, 2005, 140)