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BROWNSVILLE REVIVES WRESTLING PROGRAM

Uniontown, PA – Wrestling is back in the Brownsville Area School District, thanks in large part to one determined parent.

It took Martin Vojacek two audiences with the school board and a lot of hard work, but the Falcons are enjoying their first season in nearly two decades and hosted their first home match recently after almost 20 years as well.

Brownsville took on Neighborhood Academy, a private school in Pittsburgh, on Jan. 24 in front of a packed house at "The Nest." Laurel Highlands attended as well, with the schools' junior varsity squads competing in a tri-dual match. Vojacek said the Falcons performed well, to the cheers of a great crowd of fans.

"The community has been behind us, the administration has been behind us, the school board has been behind us," he said. "I've never seen that gymnasium with that many people in it. Just packed. It was a good feeling. It was a really good feeling."

But Brownsville's wrestlers didn't always have that kind of support. The district shut down its wrestling program in 2005 due to lack of interest, Vojacek said. "They had about three wrestlers left, and the school district decided, for lack of a better phrase, to mothball the program."

There were still plenty of youth wrestlers in Brownsville, who then had to go outside the area to compete. One of those was Vojacek's son. "My son wrestled for Frazier youth wrestling, which would be (kindergarten) through sixth grade," Vojacek said.

He explained that at that age, wrestlers can compete in any youth organization, but once they reach middle school or junior high age, they are required to compete in their own school district. Vojacek knew the interest was there and was determined to get Brownsville's wrestling programs restarted.

"I knew that, just from the amount of youth wrestlers in our school district, that there would be enough interest to where we should be able to not only field a middle school program, but we would also be successful in starting up a youth program," he said.

At first, he didn't have much luck. "I went to the school board two years ago and it didn't work out," he said.

But he didn't give up. A year later, he met with the school board again, this time with facts and figures showing the feasibility of revitalizing the program and the interest that remained in the area. At that meeting, the outcome was a little different.

"They voted 9-0 (in favor of the program) this time around," Vojacek said.

He immersed himself in starting not one, but three programs – a middle school program, a high school program and a youth program. "I went at it full-bore," he said.

In addition to Vojacek, Brownsville also hired Todd Fisher as a coach. He comes to the district from Beth-Center, and Vojacek said he is a talented coach.

"He is very, very good with the kids," Vojacek said. "He's a very good instructor."

Also joining the program as volunteer assistants is former Frazier wrestler Tyler Girvin, along with Tyler Fisher and Gwyer Jackson, both of whom wrestled for Todd Fisher at Beth-Center.

While Vojacek is technically the varsity head coach, he feels as though things are structured a bit differently. "I kind of like to consider myself as the wrestling administrator," he said. "I call (Todd Fisher) the head coach because he basically runs the practices and all the other coaches."

Vojacek said the program has gotten some help from others around the community, too. The Brownsville Wrestling Club raised roughly \$10,000, he said, which due to an agreement with the school district, was used to purchase singlets for the wrestlers, including the youth team.

Vojacek said space is at a premium and the wrestling team must vie for practice time with several others, including varsity basketball. So, the Luzerne Township Fire Department stepped in and offered its basement as a practice space for the youth program.

Former school director Rocky Brashear, who once headed up the youth wrestling program, offered another money-saving option. He tipped Vojacek that there were some wrestling mats stored under the stage at the old Redstone School.

"Sure enough, we went down there, and those mats were in very, very good condition for being 30 years old," Vojacek said.

The newly formed programs are doing well so far, particularly the youth program.

"We have 25 wrestlers in our youth program, which is very, very good," Vojacek said. "We're in what's called the Keystone League. It's a conglomerate of about 70 or 80 schools in western Pennsylvania that have youth programs."

The league offers youth wrestlers a chance to go to different locations and wrestle in tournaments for free, with at least two matches guaranteed in each tournament. The young wrestlers can compete in the Keystone Qualifiers, with the top three place winners in each weight class qualifying for the Tournament of Champions.

“I believe we sent 15 youth wrestlers to the Keystone Qualifiers,” Vojacek said. “We had seven out of our 15 youth wrestlers qualify for the Tournament of Champions.”

The junior high and varsity programs are smaller in number, with each team consisting of about seven wrestlers. Vojacek said only one of the varsity wrestlers, a transfer student from Ohio, has experience at the sport. And at times this season, Brownsville’s seventh-graders have found themselves up against freshmen, while the freshmen have competed against sophomores and juniors.

“We’re in a tough situation with being a first-year program,” Vojacek said. “To the credit of our kids, we haven’t had one wrestler in the junior varsity or varsity program quit. I think that’s a testament to them and to their dedication to the team and the program.”

Brownsville is wrestling independently this year, but Vojacek said the program has “notified the WPIAL of our intent to join a section next year.”

With the program having been defunct for so long, there are some issues to overcome. A top priority is getting the wrestlers a space of their own to practice, something Vojacek hopes to be able to find funding for soon. But on the bright side, he said, the school board and administration has supported the program all the way.

“The administration and the school board have been very, very good at working with me and keeping open the lines of communication in terms of our needs,” he said.

For more information, follow the “Brownsville Falcon Wrestling Club” on Facebook. Vojacek said anyone wishing to donate to the program also can reach out to him through the page.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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