

A Haven for High School Girls' Wrestling, Filled With Grit and Pride

The Lucha Wrestling Club in the Bronx provides a safe place for an aggressive sport. The Bronx has more public high school girls' teams than any other New York City borough.

By Corey Kilgannon

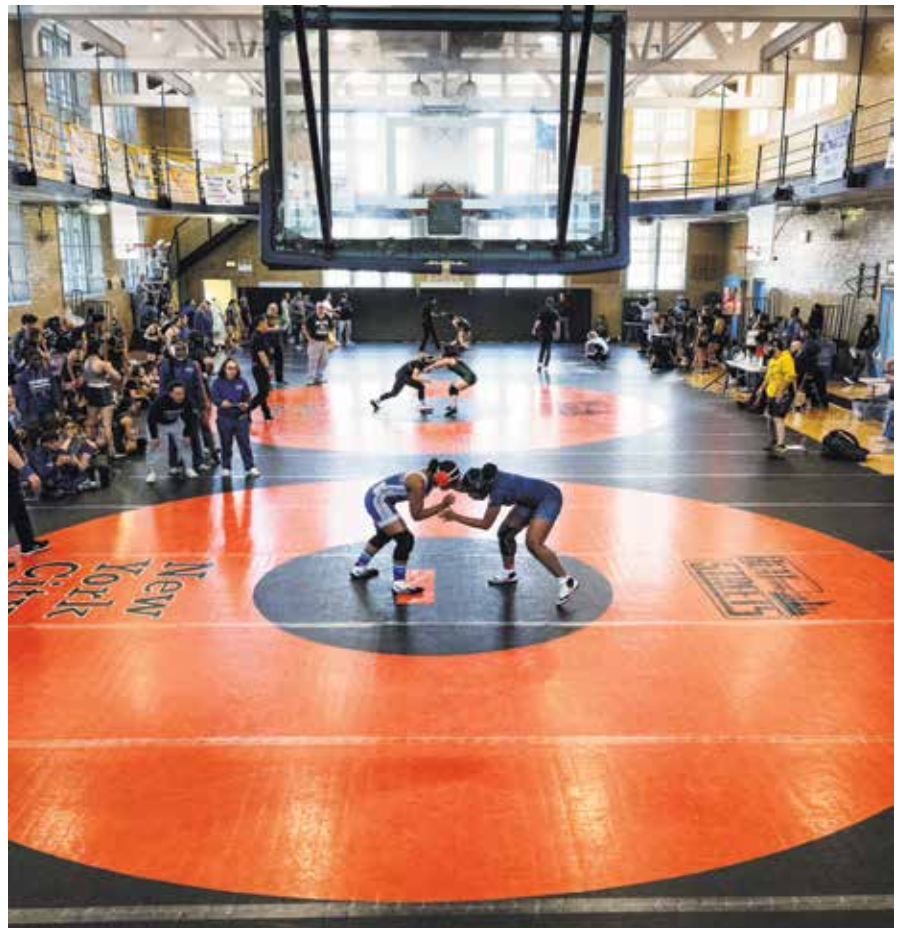
One by one, the teenage girls on Webster Avenue in the Bronx stepped past the tire shops and the men barbecuing on sidewalk grills. With stuffed animals and wrestling shoes dangling from their backpacks, they made their way up a stairway into the Bronx Combat Factory.

The second-story boxing gym is the home of the Lucha Wrestling Club, where dozens of girls come to practice alongside sweaty men sparring in a boxing ring and pounding heavy bags.

"If you're practicing in a gym like this, you know you're going to be working hard and fighting hard," said Josh Lee, who founded the club a year ago to support the growing number of girls competing on high school teams in the Bronx.

In 2013, so many girls were joining boys teams that New York City started one of America's first all-girls high school wrestling leagues, with 16 teams and about 220 wrestlers. That has since grown to 21 teams and 395 wrestlers.

The Bronx is a hotbed, with six public school teams, more than



VICTOR J. BLUE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The level of wrestling in New York City can be as good as it is anywhere in the United States. But in the Bronx, practices and matches have a decidedly different feel.

any other borough in the city. Harry S. Truman High School in the Co-op City section of the Bronx has been a powerhouse,

winning three consecutive team championships before taking second on May 10 to Curtis High School from Staten Island.

The New York Times

Sports

“The Bronx can be a gritty place with a lot of toughness and pride,” said Mr. Lee, 43, who also owns a catering company. “Wrestling is a gritty sport, it’s not fancy and it also requires a lot of pride.”

At the recent Lucha practice, the girls suited up quickly in the gym and set up their practice space by hauling worn mats out from under a boxing ring. They unrolled them next to heavy bags and martial arts equipment.

The club’s coach, Enas Ahmed, herself a former Olympic wrestler, ran the girls through take-down drills and conditioning exercises, including back arches, push-ups, crab-walk sprints, lunges and squat thrusts.

“Push yourselves. You’re almost done,” yelled Ms. Ahmed as the girls did a final round of crunches.

The wrestlers then paired off to trade moves. Some, like Anaiya Pagan, 18, were cutting pounds to make their weight classes for



KIRSTEN LUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Josh Lee founded the gym a year ago. His girls’ wrestling team at the Taft Educational Complex in the Bronx was the subject of the documentary “Lucha: A Wrestling Tale.” Lee said that “wrestling is a gritty sport, it’s not fancy and it also requires a lot of pride.”

postseason tournaments, which include the city individual championships this weekend.

Anaiya sweated through layers of workout gear, her hood

tied tightly to make her sweat more. With drawn cheeks and dry lips, she said she was determined to lose her last few pounds of “water weight” to make the 115-pound class.

Since joining the team at Samuel Gompers Industrial High School in the South Bronx last year, she said wrestling had become her passion and had “definitely kept me away from ’hood stuff.”

Now a senior, Anaiya’s plan is to get out of New York, wrestling for New Jersey City University in relatively bucolic Jersey City. “I grew up hearing gunshots in my neighborhood, and I don’t want to hear that anymore.”

The level of wrestling in New York City can be as good as it is in the heartland or the suburbs. But off the mat, especially in the Bronx, the state’s poorest county, practices and matches can have a decidedly different feel. Wres-



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The Samuel Gompers team, known as the Panthers, gathering before the meet at Grover Cleveland High School in Brooklyn. There are more than 150 college female wrestling teams and clubs and thousands of high school teams.

The New York Times

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KENT J. EDWARDS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A practice session of the Lucha Wrestling Club, which caters to the growing number of girls competing on high school teams in the Bronx.



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Female wrestling is one of the country's fastest growing sports, with more than 150 college teams and clubs and thousands of high school teams.

tlers often travel by subway or bus, and pass through metal detectors to enter schools.

Space is scarce. At the Taft Educational Complex, where Mr. Lee founded a high school girls' team in 2013, he said his wrestlers had to move bulky lunch tables out of the way to practice in the cafeteria.

Mr. Lee does not schedule Lucha practices at night, out of concern for the girls' safety. He said one recruit was unable to wrestle this year after being shot in the arm.

Female wrestling is one of the fastest growing sports in the country, with more than 150 college teams and clubs and thousands of high school teams.

In January, the N.C.A.A. added women's wrestling as a championship sport, which will likely lead to an uptick in teams and clubs and more opportunities for admission and scholarships, Mr. Lee said.

His club offers crucial training to become a college-level wres-

tlers, connecting girls with collegiate programs and coaches. Lucha also teaches girls to use wrestling to focus, empower and discipline their lives.

Lucha wrestlers are primarily Black and Hispanic. Many are immigrants or first-generation Americans and would be the first in their families to attend college.

At a recent practice, Emma Randall, head coach of Columbia University's women's wrestling club, spoke to the Lucha members about applying to colleges. One wrestler from the Truman girl's team now wrestles at Columbia and Ms. Randall visits tournaments and practices in the city to scout more recruits.



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The Lucha Wrestling Club teaches girls how to use the sport to focus, empower and discipline their lives.



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Pearl Fletcher, center, the coach of Samuel Gompers Industrial, met with Anaiya Pagan, left, and Monique Teal before a recent city league meet.

The club is an outgrowth of, and takes its name — “struggle,” in Spanish — from “Lucha: A Wrestling Tale,” a documentary about Mr. Lee’s Taft team in the South Bronx.

The film is a poignant portrayal of the sport as a positive force for wrestlers facing challenges like homelessness, language barriers and academic struggles.

Viewers at festivals and screenings offered to donate money toward the wrestlers, said Mr. Lee, who formed the Lucha club as a nonprofit to channel the funds into uniforms and tournament travel.

At the practice, Saniyaa Cedaño, 17, ferociously bear-hugged her partner to the mat, only to then politely help her up. During a break, Saniyaa said she grew up partly in family homeless

shelters. While settled now, she said, “I don’t travel much and rarely get out of New York, so just getting on a bus to go upstate to a tournament is eye-opening.”

The donations also go toward paying Ms. Ahmed, who competed for Egypt in the 2016 and 2020 Olympics.

All but two of the girls’ wrestling teams at New York City public high schools are coached by men, and Mr. Lee was adamant about hiring a female head coach.

One of Lucha’s assistants is Pearl Fletcher, 26, who also coaches the Gompers team. She founded the team last year after raising \$2,000 for uniforms and travel, and most important, recruiting enough girls.

“It can be hard for a guy to sell girls on joining a girls’ wrestling team,” said Ms. Fletcher.

“I would tell girls, ‘Half you guys are trying to fight all the time anyway, so why not do it as a sport? You get to beat people up legally and you lose weight while doing it,’” she said. “I would tell them that it’s a healthy outlet that gives you the discipline to persevere.”

Several Lucha members said wrestling had helped them lose weight, gain confidence and focus on their futures.

Angiee Atlixqueno, a senior at A. Philip Randolph Campus High School, said wrestling had helped her lose more than 30 pounds. Now at a lean 138, she is entering the U.S. Air Force in June.

“When I told the recruiters I was a wrestler, they said they would recommend me for Special Forces,” she said.