

Wrestling, girls do it too.

Examining the rise of women's wrestling in the United States since the turn of the 21st century

By Christopher Miller

In 1997, former Olympic wrestler Anibal Nieves was in Springfield Massachusetts coaching men's wrestling at American International College, a NCAA Division II institution. Nieves was newly into his coaching career after competing for his native country Puerto Rico in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

In addition to leading American International, Nieves started New England All-Star, a youth wrestling club in Springfield aiming to train and educate children in the, "beautiful sport" Nieves says, "changed my life."

"I was a wild and crazy kid, but once I got into wrestling, it tamed me," Nieves said. "It showed me discipline, humility and brought me close to God. It taught me to hit the books. You got to hit the books if you want to be eligible."

That summer, Janice Fuqua and her daughter Melyssa Fuqua, then a high school sophomore, asked Nieves if the club allowed girls to participate. Somewhat confused, Nieves assured both mother and daughter that Melyssa was welcome to join.

After that first workout Nieves was greeted with a teary-eyed embrace from Janice. Then, Nieves learned how much Melyssa loved wrestling. Only two years into her career at the time, Melyssa was struggling because coaches wouldn't teach her.

"I didn't realize how tough it was at that moment for young ladies to compete," Nieves recalled.

Today, female wrestlers across the U.S. are still struggling for acceptance, access and equality within the sport, but it's their continued, tireless, efforts to participate that are saving wrestling today. A sport often characterized by masculine bravado – is being revitalized by girl and women wrestlers.

Melyssa Fuqua's struggles to find a welcoming wrestling room came when the entire college wrestling world was writhing. Not only did the sport lose more than 550 collegiate programs across its three divisions between 1972 and 1999, stemming largely from Title IX compliance concerns, but also, 1997 saw three male Division I wrestlers lose their lives to weight-loss related issues in a span of six weeks, which "almost brought the sport to its knees," said Mike Moyer, executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association, on a recent [State of Wrestling podcast](#).

The early 2000s marked a new chapter for the sport as it looked forward. Although wrestling is still striving toward the popularity and prominence it once had, one constant has been the increased presence of female grapplers.

Prior to Title IX, the role of the female athlete was severely restricted. Athletic opportunities often aligned with traditional gender roles. As pointed out by Kirby, Roberts, Coakley, Stanec and Gormley in their 2018 case study, "[Why Women's Wrestling, Why Now](#)"

"During the first half of the twentieth century girls and women were generally excluded from sport participation or guided into individual "grace and beauty" sports performed as individuals with scoring

based on gendered ideas about artistic merit. Direct competition against opponents was discouraged, but gradually occurred as women participated in sports where competitors were separated by nets, lane dividers, and other barriers that precluded physical contact.”

June 23, 1972

For males in the U.S., this day was just another Friday. But, for the females in the U.S., this Friday likely changed the trajectory of their lives – academically, athletically or possibly both.

On this day, Title IX of the education amendments of 1972 was enacted into law. It read as follows:

“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”

Although the primary objective of Title IX was to expand the limited educational opportunities available for women and girls, it’s the application of Title IX to athletics that gained the greatest public visibility in the nearly five decades since it was enacted. Title IX greatly impacted the growth of certain non-revenue generating sports, wrestling in particular.

Even after Title IX, there was resistance toward women becoming combat athletes. Even though women’s wrestling dates back to the 1970s the sport wasn’t introduced to the World University Championships until 2001 and then the Olympics in 2004 at the Athens Games. Since then, wrestling came back to high schools and colleges in the U.S. Some states even sanctioned women-only high school divisions.

“Putting women's wrestling in the Olympics was one of those defining moments that ratified women's wrestling as a sport,” said Fred Arkin, assistant coach Oak Park and River Forest High School. “That was one of the foundational pieces to why I think girls wrestle. They go online and watch some of the best women from the United States wrestle in the World Championship and Olympics and say, ‘Hey, I can do that too.’”

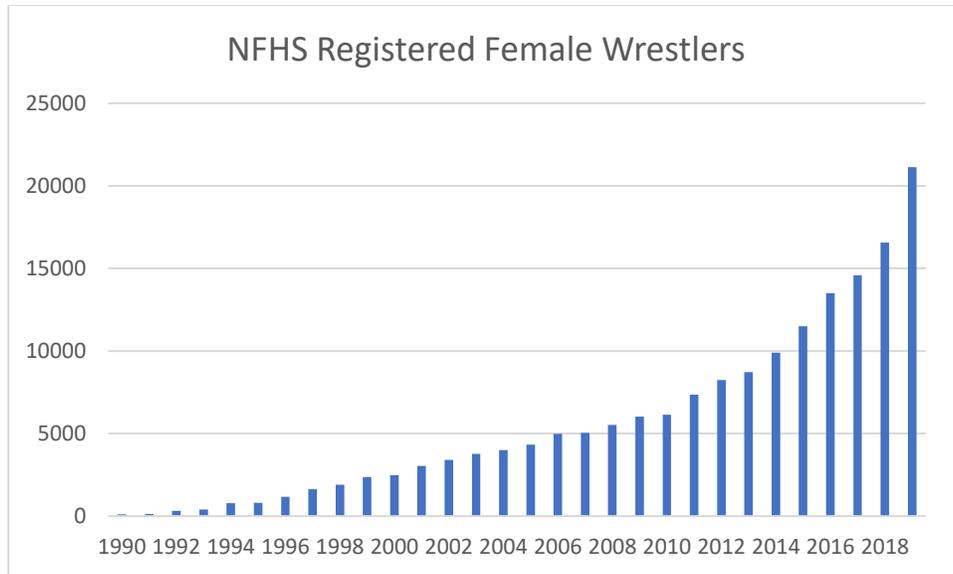
Regardless of the reason, the rise of girls in wrestling has been noticeable.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations’ [annual participation survey](#), wrestling has grown in all five categories reported for the second consecutive year.

The 2018-19 data revealed that wrestling’s growth last season comes when overall participation across all high school sports has declined for the first time in 30 years.

Wrestling’s biggest jump however came in girls wrestling, which has grown for 30 straight years.

Statistically, there were 21,124 girls participating in 2018-19, an increase of 4,562 athletes from last year. Thus, there is 27.5% increase from 2017-18. Additionally, the number of schools with girls wrestling climbed to 2,890, an increase of 539 schools. This connotes a 22.9% increase from 2017-18. With that, girls high school wrestling is the No. 17 most popular high school sport for girls. Most significantly, as reported Wrestle Like A Girl (WLAG), the leading advocacy organization for the advancement of girls and women’s wrestling, there are currently 24 state high school associations which have developed or announced official girls high school wrestling championships, an increase from six two seasons ago.



Source: 2018-19 HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS PARTICIPATION SURVEY

In the context of boys high school wrestling, the figures tell a different tale. The survey revealed that wrestling remained the No. 7 sport among boys in terms of participants, and the No. 8 sport in terms of number of schools. However, 2018-19 was just the second straight year, boys high school wrestling grew in both categories. Prior to this growth, boys wrestling had declined for six straight years.

In 2018-19, boys high school wrestling grew by less than 2,000 athletes and only 68 teams from the previous year.

The combined number of high school wrestlers, including both boys and girls, grew to 268,565, an increase of 6,439 athletes, which shows a 2.5% growth rate.

“Look at what the actual [participation] numbers are,” said Mike Powell, executive director of Beat the Streets Chicago. “This whole wrestling is healthy notion, that’s not true. In wrestling, male numbers are way down. [High school] wrestling is healthy because of women.”

“Women are popping our numbers up,” Powell continued. They are literally saving our sport. And, if you don’t see that you’re a fool.”

According to a recent [State of Wrestling podcast](#), at the collegiate level women’s wrestling has also seen a significant rise in number of programs with women’s wrestling. Across all NCAA divisions, plus National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) schools and junior colleges, there are now nearly 80 women’s college wrestling programs, more than 70 of those have come since 2007.

Although women’s participation is up, what cannot be gleaned from the data is that access, even to participate on the boys team isn’t always given – often it’s discouraged. Christen Dierken, associate women’s head coach at Gannon University learned this the hard way during her prep career in Fullerton, California from 2004-2007.

“I actually hated wrestling that entire first year in high school,” Dierken said. “I hated being hated [by the team]. I hated being tolerated. I hated being physically beaten up every day. I had no idea what I was

doing and I was in survival mode. I knew that the guys were trying to get me to quit so my whole first year, I didn't learn wrestling. I learned how to survive.”

Dierken initially thought she would quit after her freshman season, but learned at the team banquet her teammates expected that. She refused to let them be right. That determination to prove naysaying teammates and coaches wrong coupled with success at an instructional wrestling camp changed everything.

“I went to summer camp and had my first win,” Dierken said. “I started learning what it meant to be a champion. It changed my life. I fell in love with the feeling of getting my hand raised and I was just hooked, obsessed with wrestling.”

That obsession led Dierken to become an Olympic hopeful who, at her peak was No. 2 in the country underneath, only Olympian Helen Maroulis. In 2016, Maroulis became the first American to win a gold medal in women's freestyle wrestling at the Rio Olympics.

Bowen High School assistant wrestling coach Andrea Hale didn't have a welcoming experience either when she joined the Harper High School wrestling team in Chicago in 2001 as a sophomore.

Hale and seven female teammates, all of whom joined the team together, struggled to be taught during that first season and were usually relegated to exhibition matches. By her senior year, Hale was the only female left.

“I got to wrestle a girl one time in high school, during an exhibition match as a senior,” Hale recalled. “It was uplifting. It felt really good mentally and physically. It was like, ‘Oh, I’m not the only one.’”

Hale went on to wrestle at Lassen Community College in California before transferring to Pacific University in Portland, Oregon to conclude her collegiate career.

As an eighth grader at Homer Middle School in Homer, Alaska, future 2004 Olympian Tela Bacher was forbidden from joining the team. Only after winning a case against the school board, sighting a Title IX violation, was she able to join the team. She became the second female to place at state tournament.

The stories of Dierken, Hale and Bacher are not uncommon in high school wrestling, they are the norm.

“There is a disproportionate amount of proving that women have to do before there is a level of acceptance to their participation,” said Andrea Yamamoto, co-chair of the USA Wrestling Girls High School Development Committee.

Yamamoto attested to this gender-based double-standard – something she saw first-hand as a member of the Richland High School wrestling team in Washington from 1986-1988.

“If I'm a freshman boy and I come out for wrestling for the first time, the amount of proving he has to do is normal within the scope of his male community. But, when I come in as a female, the amount of constant proving is a lot greater,” Yamamoto said. “I sometimes wonder how much more proving do we have to do, but I think culturally, we're starting to see that shift.”

Shifting a long-standing cultural belief that wrestling is a “man’s sport” is not easy, but it can be done, Mike Powell is proof of that.

“Like most college wrestlers I was very anti-Title IX,” Powell recalled.

Powell, former 1994 171-pound Illinois High School State Champion and 1996 NCAA All-American at Indiana University changed his stance on having women in wrestling after hearing former Olympian and college coach Bobby Douglas.

“In order for wrestling to survive, we have to promote diversity – women, ethnicity, handicapped, seniors. Wrestling is the oldest organized sport in the world, with the richest history. Wrestling is good for America and for the world,” Douglas said in an interview with Bill Barron of Rocky Mountain Nationals Events.

After hearing that, Powell was open to having women in his Oak Park and River Forest wrestling room where he coached the varsity squad from 2005 to 2014. During that time, he met one girl who sold him on female wrestlers.

“I met Nikki Valentini who wrestled for us [at Oak Park],” Powell recalled. “She wasn’t a particularly gifted athlete, but man did she have guts and she was an unbelievable team player. She went on our senior backpacking trip and she became a part of the Husky wrestling family.”

Valentini, who had a brief collegiate wrestling career at the University of the Cumberland, was a trailblazer, one of many within the Oak Park wrestling community. Today, less than a decade later, Oak Park has a separate women’s team with nearly 20 girls on the roster – an effort spearheaded by a group of determined young wrestlers and Oak Park and River Forest assistant coach Fred Arkin.

“It’s not appropriate for girls to be wrestling against boys,” Arkin said. “Three or four years ago, there were a lot of girls involved in our team. So, I saw the need to get this thing organized and get it off the ground.”

For Powell, his Beat the Streets club, which is currently serving over 2,000 participants in some of Chicago’s most challenged neighborhoods, is nearly one-third female.

Even with access to a welcoming and supportive wrestling room, a women’s quest to be a high school wrestler is challenging. After entering the room, there are still physical, mental and emotional hurdles to overcome.

Gabrielle Lord-Klein, former Waldorf University wrestler and founder of Transition Wrestling, a website that covers girls’ high school and college wrestling, was indoctrinated into the sport after attending an open practice.

“I started wrestling when I was five or six,” Lord-Klein said. “My brothers came home, and we’re just like, ‘Hey, there’s this youth wrestling practice,’ and we all went. There was no second thought about it. I’ve wrestled ever since.”

Admittedly, Lord-Klein didn’t fully embrace the sport until her sophomore season at Stevens Point Area High School in Wisconsin, but wrestling eventually became “everything” by the end of her senior season.

“I love that I could just exhaust myself and just work so incredibly hard,” Lord-Klein said. “I craved that. It was very intense and easy to just lose yourself in practice.”

Her commitment was evident. Lord-Klein was voted a captain as a senior in 2010.

“Looking back on it, there was so much disempowerment happening. But at that time, I was very well received, I was supported,” Lord-Klein said.

Overall, Lord-Klein looks back on her prep career with fondness, but does wonder how different it would have been if she grew up in one of the 24 states that sanction a women's division.

"I just think what it would have been like if I had a bus full of girl wrestlers going to a competition against [other] girls," Lord-Klein said. "[When that happens] you are allowing them to show up as they are without having to fight to prove themselves."

"Girls should be fighting to be the best in the state and be great at technique. They shouldn't have to also advocate for a place to exist," Lord-Klein continued."

Although she enjoyed every moment of her prep career, the majority of which she was the lone female competitor, there were times it took a mental toll on her.

"I took a lot of losses in high school and when I finished my last competition, I was devastated," Lord-Klein recalled. "It was so hurtful to me that I could give absolutely everything and I still couldn't win. I still couldn't win no matter how hard I tried because my biology betrayed me."

"If a girl is working her butt off and doing everything that she can, and she still can't win, not because of anything that she can control, specifically biology, that is like having to put down all the things that you train for," Lord-Klein continued. "I wanted to win a state title in high school, my biology basically said, 'No, Gabby, you can't do that.' But in my mind, I was just as strong as a boy."

Off the mat, Lord-Klein says spending more than a decade surrounded almost exclusively by males created certain biases.

"I had to rewire my relationship to how I thought about leadership and people in power positions," Lord-Klein said. "I had to wrap my head around my bias against women because of wrestling."

Any wrestler knows it is a physically taxing sport, that's part of wrestling's allure. However, that allure fades to danger when females have no choice but to face males.

For Katherine Shai (formerly Fulp-Allen), a six-time member of the U.S. National Team, wrestling was a family activity.

Her father was Lee Allen, whom many remember as an Olympic athlete and Olympic coach. Her older sister Sara was one of the most accomplished wrestlers in California high school wrestling history, becoming the first female to qualify for the state tournament.

It was a forgone conclusion – Katherine would wrestle.

Learning from Sara's experiences and her numerous injuries over a four-year varsity career at Half Moon Bay High School in El Granada, California, Katherine, unlike her older sister, would participate against girls.

"We made the decision my freshman year," Shai said. "We were like wait, why are we having Katherine wrestle boys? Our whole family is advocating for girls wrestling. There are all these girls in California, we had a girls tournament we could go to every single weekend."

While the decision was right for her, it didn't go over well in the community.

"Once we made that choice, there was some negativity toward that," Shai recalled. "People thought, 'You could be helping your high school team win, but you've chosen not to.'"

Whether your daughter should suit up against boys is a decision every parent struggles with, especially Colleen McGlynn, executive board member on the Illinois Wrestling Coaches and Officials Association, whose daughter Grace is a wrestler at McKendree University in Illinois.

“There was a lot of high school tournaments that I didn't let her participate in,” McGlynn recalled.

“Mostly because I didn't want her getting hurt. I knew she had a collegiate career ahead of her. I didn't want her to get so mentally beat up that she couldn't perform in the postseason. It creates a lot of aches and anxiety and it's just not worth it.”

“It's the difference between weight and muscle versus technique,” McGlynn continued.

Mia Palumbo, ranked No. 1 nationally by FloWrestling at 106 pounds has dealt with this dilemma her entire career at Richards High School in Illinois. As a freshman in 2018, Palumbo became the first girl to win a match at the state tournament. In fact, she won two, but it came with a price. She suffered two tears in the labrum of one of her hips in a quarterfinal loss.

Nearly a year later, injury struck again – this time she suffered a torn meniscus in one of her knees.

Now a junior, Palumbo, still the top 106-pounder in the country, decided she will no longer compete against boys, focusing exclusively on the female circuit.

Parents and coaches alike are not keen on girls often being forced to wrestle the opposite gender.

“The power behind their shots are just different than the power behind our shots,” Dierken said. “Their center of gravity is different, everything is different. The injury rate is so much higher trying to wrestle a man.”

Obvious physical, mental and emotional risks of cross-gender wrestling aside, not providing the opportunity to wrestle against fellow females is likely deterring women from the sport altogether.

“I think it's okay for girls to train with boys, but to compete against them, that's just not right or fair,” Erin Vandiver, head coach of Wyoming Seminary girls wrestling team, said. “For girls that are just coming out maybe in high school, they're not going to try the sport if they have to get picked up and slammed by a boy every day. They're just not going to enjoy it. But, if a girl gets to wrestle another girl, and she has some success and some failure, she's gonna stick with it.”

“It's not okay,” Vandiver continued. “No other sport expects their females to compete with the boys, especially in a physically combative sport. It might be fair they get to wrestle [on the boys' team], but it's not equal. It's nowhere close to equal.”

An added malady of cross-gender wrestling, females don't get to enjoy team experience the same way their male teammates do.

“I admire these young ladies for coming out, because it isn't easy, they didn't live the life of a regular boy high school wrestler,” Nieves said. They would have to weigh in separately can't enjoy a big team victory in the locker room, they have to by themselves in the hallway, hearing all celebration.”

The lack of female versus female wrestling opportunities is exactly what led teammates Ava Bayless and Korina Blades to transfer to Wyoming Seminary – an elite girls Olympic development program accredited by USA Wrestling.

“It's really hard in high school to only be on a guys team,” Ava Bayless, a Wyoming Seminary sophomore said. “Being the only girl on a guys team has a feeling of loneliness.”

For Korina Blades, the transfer to Wyoming Seminary was a welcome change because she wouldn't have to deal with male teammates afraid to wrestle against her.

“A big struggle for me and my sister was finding partners,” Blades said. There was always something holding them back. But, on the girls team, we just have such a special bond. We all want it; we all wrestle each other. As long as we're getting better and training it doesn't matter.”

Additionally, for Blades, there is a comfort in being coached by a fellow female wrestler.

“We've grown up with the same struggles,” Blades said. “My coach, me and the girls on the team, we all had the struggles of being the only girls on the team. I feel like they know where we're at, whether it's emotionally or physically. We are always able to talk about things more openly.”

The future of women's wrestling, whether at youth, high school, collegiate or international levels, looks encouraging.

Today, women wrestlers of all ages, shapes, sizes and skill levels have persevered from a pre-Title IX era that essentially forbid participation in most sports, let alone combat sports, to an era where women's wrestling has become one of the fastest growing sports in the country, according to *Wrestle Like A Girl*.

At the high school level, certain states have been slower to add a girls division due to wording of their state bylaws. But legal and cultural justifications aside, it is evident that administrators are gradually opening up to the idea of bringing girls wrestling to their respective states.

“The tone has shifted,” McGlynn said. “I recently met with the IHSA's [Illinois High School Association] boys wrestling advisory committee. Last year, it was tenuous, the guys that are on the committee weren't really sure. This year, people were looking at the IHSA representative that sits on the board, saying, ‘Well, why haven't we done this?’”

Brad Engel, head coach at William Howard Taft High School in Illinois has even noticed that gender has mattered less over the past few seasons in his wrestling room.

“Kids are accepting of so much more now,” Engel said. “If you can prove yourself, you're welcome in a wrestling room. I don't know that it works anywhere but in wrestling. Wrestling is the ultimate equalizer. Beat the number one kid and you get to start.”

“The only way you can tell the girls in our program from the guys is typically because they have longer hair,” Engel said. “Other than that, they're out there wearing the same stuff, and they're out there battling the same way.”

According to Joan Fulp, co-chair of USA Wrestling High School Development Committee, attitudes are changing because of increased visibility and more education among parents, coaches and administrators on what a valuable tool wrestling is for young girls.

“Visibility is critical,” Fulp said. “We still have many areas where girls wrestling is not visible and that is the key to our conversation with any executive director or state liaison in charge of wrestling. They say, ‘We just don't see it.’”

With respect to the education aspect, Fulp said she believes many athletic directors focus on budgetary concerns of adding a team or sanctioning a sport rather than the obvious benefits it brings.

According to the NWCA, wrestling ranks second among all men's NCAA sports in first-generation student-athletes. Experts, Fulp included, believe a similar impact can be achieved once more women have access to girls teams.

At the college level, the majority of the growth has occurred since 2007. However, arguably the biggest victories for the women's college wrestling have come since 2018. During that span the following has occurred:

1. The number of collegiate wrestling opportunities have continued climbing and are nearing 80 institutions.
2. The NAIA added women's wrestling as an invitational sport during the 2018-19 academic year – the equivalent of an NCAA Championship for all NAIA member institutions.
3. Planning began in February to launch a Community College Women's Wrestling National Championships in 2021.
4. At the NCAA Division II and NCAA Division III levels, women's wrestling was approved as an emerging sport. [Per the NCAA](#), this status acknowledges the following: "Girls wrestling now has a 10-year period to become a championship sport unless it can be demonstrated that steady growth has occurred during that time. To become a NCAA sponsored championship sport, at least 40 NCAA institutions sponsor the sport at the varsity level." Currently, the number of NCAA sponsored girls' programs has eclipsed 30 and is nearing the necessary numbers to give female collegiate wrestlers a shot at an NCAA title.
5. A vote to potentially approve women's wrestling as emerging sport at the division I level is expected to be made and ultimately granted by the end of 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This is one of the most exciting things that we've been able to be a part of today with Wrestle Like A Girl," said Sally Roberts, WLAG founder and CEO, on a [State of Wrestling podcast](#). "We've opened up another association, the NCAA to be able to accept athletes to come and wrestle under that umbrella with emerging sport status and now it puts them on the pathway towards an NCAA championship,"

Girls wrestling has seen a myriad of improvements from the grassroots to Olympic levels in recent years. Similarly, courageous women and girls alike have been denied access to the sport, suffered physical, mental and emotional traumas as they've progressed through their careers. Still, they wrestle. Today, those efforts are what is saving the sport as a whole. But, the quest for women's wrestling to achieve the true equality that Title IX intended them to have some 58 years ago it's just getting started.