

'We Used to Be in the Shadows': New Rainier Girls Wrestling Coach Looks to Kick-Start Program

BY ERIC ROSANE
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Most wrestlers don't spend time at practice working on gymnastic routines, but that's just what the Rainier girls wrestling team found itself doing last Friday at the Yelm Gymnastics Center.

That's because the district recently hired Kelli Garner, a fifth-grade teacher at Rainier Elementary and owner of the gym, to lead a team that now stands at nine girls strong.

That number is pretty remarkable for a program that hasn't seen much success in recent years due to its size and focus.

It's also part of the reason why she came into the coaching position.

"If it allows the girls to do more and have more opportunity to participate, I'm down," Garner recalled thinking.

Her daughter, junior Alia Garner, has competed with the wrestling program for about a year. When she heard that Head Coach Chris Holterman was looking for someone to step up, she considered it.

Garner has been involved in gymnastics with her daughter for about seven years. Both sports are physically grueling and provide their own set of challenges.

The new Mountaineers coach said while she may not know much about the technical aspects of wrestling, she'll be able to leverage her experience as a gymnastics coach to help lead the girls to bigger and better things.

"Being able to send the girls to their own events is much more beneficial than just tagging along with the boys," Holterman wrote in an email to the Nisqually Valley News. "Their match counts will more than double what they had last year ... It was a very good move by the district to step forward and say, 'yes we want to build something here that is posi-



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Top, from left, sophomore Jenna Henderson, sophomore Ilanys Osorio, freshman Sofia Chiellini, sophomore Anna Champlyn, senior Erika DeMint, junior Kylie Van Elsacker, freshman Amanda Morris and senior Vanessa Champlyn. Bottom row, head girls coach Kelli Garner poses with her daughter, junior Alia Garner.

and will increase participation for Rainier students."

The team still plans on taking guidance from Holterman.

"If you're a good coach, it's easy to transfer those skills to another sport," Garner said. "I love working with them. They're a great group of girls."

Many of the lady Mountaineers say they're excited to have Garner leading them and are looking forward to the independence they'll have as a team, both while on the road and at practice.

"We used to have no support. We used to be in the shadows," said sophomore wrestler Anna

Champlin. "It's kind of awesome having practice with just the girls so we can focus on us."

"Yeah," added junior Kylie Van Elsacker. "It's not about the boys anymore. It's about the girls."

Van Elsacker said last season her team would mostly trail along to whatever meet the boys were heading to and would attend one or two girl tournaments a season. So far this season, they've been able to go to at least one every week.

Many of the girl wrestling teams in Rainier's 2B Central League are small, Garner said, so

they often compete against larger and more well-established programs.

"It's a challenge, but it's a good challenge," Champlin said. "We don't have a lot of resources, but we work with what we got."

Many of the girls agree though that there's been plenty of support within the community to help them grow the program and succeed.

This year's team is a mixed bag as far as age and experience. The team has two freshmen, three sophomores, two juniors and two seniors.

Many of them have dabbled in

gymnastics, so the conditioning routine at the Gymnastics Center doesn't feel too off for many of the athletes.

The Mountaineers aren't returning any state placers on the roster. But hopefully, with a little grit and determination, they'll be able to change that.

Garner said her goals this year for the team are to build a cohesiveness and lay a comprehensive foundation for success.

"I just want to be out there and have fun with them," she said. "It's about them. It's all about them. They're the ones doing the super hard work."

Yelm Fastpitch Standouts Sign to Play at Pierce College

BY ERIC ROSANE
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Two Yelm High School seniors signed letters of intent Tuesday, Jan. 7, to play fastpitch at Pierce College.

Tornados Cydney Jarvis, an outfielder and pitcher, and Hailey Brown, who pitches and plays first base, signed the letters among the company of YHS Athletics staff, Pierce County Head Coach Mike Nelson and family and friends in the library shortly after class on Tuesday.

Both girls said they've had their eyes on Pierce College — a great program with fun coaches that isn't far from Yelm.

Brown said she's looking forward to continuing her fastpitch career in college and furthering her education while staying closer to home.

"I've been looking at Pierce for a while now," the left-handed pitcher said. "I'm appreciative of the coaches and of the program."

Both athletes were instrumental in helping the Tornados reach the state championship game against Garfield last season and ultimately placing second in the 3A classification.

Alongside 2019 graduate Tayelyn Cutler, Brown helped lead the charge both defensively on the rubber and offensively at bat.

She was also named to last year's South Sound Conference first team and was named to the all-league's second team the year prior. She's also been named to the all-state team.

The Pierce College program was also on Jarvis' shortlist. The opportunity to continue to play closer to home after high school



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Yelm seniors Hailey Brown, left, and Cydney Jarvis, right, pose for a photo with their families after signing letters of commitment to play fastpitch at Pierce College. The two pitchers led the Tornados to a runner up finish at the 3A state tournament last season.

means she'll have time to decide on what program she'd like to study and if she's interested in pursuing a four-year degree.

"I'm hoping to pitch a lot more, become stronger and make more relationships on the team," Jarvis said.

This upcoming season,

which is due to begin in a couple months, Jarvis said she's nervous for her last year and graduation, but added that she's excited for the opportunity to move forward.

Pierce College's fastpitch program plays in the Northwest Athletic Conference.

Head Coach Mike Nelson said the addition of Jarvis and Brown is a net benefit for his program. When looking to recruit talent, he's looking for players who are all-around good students and even better people. Jarvis' and Brown's characters reflect both those things, Nelson said.

"It definitely gives us more options because both players are quite versatile," he said. "I've followed both athletes for the last few years. They actually played club ball for a friend of mine and I've had the opportunity to see them play before ... They're really quality people."