

# Sports

## Local wrestling coaches adjust to recent COVID-19 outbreaks



COURTESY PHOTO

Alex Ford, a Prairie High School junior, gets ready to wrestle an opponent.



COURTESY PHOTO

Gunnar Henderson, a Battle Ground senior, wrestles a Prairie High School wrestler in a match.

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Local wrestling coaches are trying to get their grapplers up to speed again after a large COVID-19 outbreak in December affected 37 athletes in Clark County.

La Center School District Athletic Director Matt Cooke is doing what he can to adapt to the situation.

“When the county made the recommendation to pause wrestling, we were a little frustrated because we had no positive cases on our team,” said Cooke. “The community was also in an uproar and I got lots of communication to my office. And of course, they went down to the county health department office on Dec. 21 and Dr. Melnick told them that it was up to the schools (to pause matches), and they just recommended it, not mandated it.”

Since then, Cooke said there has only been one positive case, but it was unrelated to any of the wrestling matches. He speculated the wrestler caught the virus over the weekend. The wrestler quarantined before making any contact with teammates.

Each school requires its wrestlers to test three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays and

Fridays. Cooke said if an athlete misses a day, they have to get a COVID-19 test the next day.

Battle Ground High School wrestling coach Karl Johnson currently has two athletes on his team who tested positive, as well as an assistant coach. Johnson said they were able to contain the virus before it impacted other wrestlers.

“Whether (the virus transmission) comes from outside-in or inside-out, you just never know,” said Johnson. “The only way I see it is if a coach tells me, but it’s also all handled by our nurses and medical staff and they can’t tell me who because of HIPAA.”

Johnson said the athletes can’t participate in matches if they’ve been in quarantine and missed practice.

“I can’t put an athlete on the mat if they haven’t been practicing. It’s just not safe,” he said.

He said a “paramount part” of his job is to protect the safety of his athletes, although he admits the process can be frustrating.

COVID-19 testing at the district takes about 10 minutes to acquire results, and with around 45 wrestlers on the team, Johnson said that adds extra time on top of their practices. Since many parents want their kids to be done at 5:45 or 6 p.m., that is another

thing he said he must balance.

Johnson does what he can to abide by the mask and social distancing mandates, but it’s not always easy, he said.

“We’re doing the best we can, (but) it’s wrestling,” Johnson said. “When you bring the community in, it’s easy to point fingers. I’ve been at every tournament and the coaches take it seriously. When you’re talking to a 15-year-old and he’s coming off the mat and he tries to put the mask back up, it’s hard.”

Although students are not required to be vaccinated, he noted that staff, including teachers and coaches, need to be.

“I think the message here is that the number one goal is safety. The second is to keep the kids on the mat, so everything else outside of that matters not to me,” Johnson said. “I have my own personal opinion about it, but it’s irrelevant if you keep those two goals in focus.”



COURTESY PHOTO

Lucas Kyle, a Prairie High School senior, pins an opponent in a match.

The team is supposed to compete in a tournament on Jan. 29, but it’s unknown if the event will be postponed due to the rise of cases because of the omicron variant. It was originally meant to be on Jan. 8 but got pushed back because of the outbreaks.

Rob Smith, coach of Prairie High School’s team, had a few wrestlers in quarantine. He is happy with the new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations.

“The state just woke up and changed the quarantine days to match what the CDC recommends, with five for people vaccinated and 10 days for the unvaccinated,” said Smith. “Preventing outbreaks of COVID is like trying to prevent yourself from get-

ting the cold. It’s not going to matter what you do, because we test three days a week. That’s setup to catch any possible infections so they can get removed from practice and start their quarantine period.”

He said the testing the athletes have to go through “puts a little fear in their daily routine.” Oftentimes the wrestlers come to school and don’t know if they’ll be sent home regardless of if they are experiencing symptoms.

“It takes their focus away from what’s important because they need to be focused on wrestling, but they’re so worried about passing the test or not passing the test, putting an extra level of stress on their bodies that they don’t need,” Smith said.



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