

# Flathead coach Thompson is making NW Montana proud

By Bill X. Barron

Where Northwest Montana touches Canada lies Kalispell, home for Flathead High School and the valley's wrestling club. Under the leadership of coach Jeff Thompson, the high school has won eight boys and two girls AA high school state championships and has had four nationally-ranked teams while competing in the large-school division.

Thompson, a former three-time Montana state champion for Great Falls High School in 1991 and high school All-American (finishing second at the Junior Nationals), wrestled at the University of Minnesota where he was an All-Big Ten Conference wrestler and a member of the 1994 Minnesota team that was the ranked No. 1 in the country.

Flathead won both the boys and girls 2022 state championships and in 2004 and 2008, Coach Thompson was a regional National Coach of the Year. An Iron-man finisher in 2016, Jeff is a secondary school business teacher who enjoys mountain biking and hiking in his free time.

"Every day in our wrestling room is going to be a brawl, and you are guaranteed to get in a great workout," describes Jeff. "I am blessed with one of the best coaching staffs in Montana, if not the Northwest United States. We have four Division I wrestlers coaching, along with some fantastic NAIA and NCAA national qualifiers, former Flathead wrestlers and a female coach. That is unbelievable for a small town in Northwest Montana."

Thompson said he believes the "secret sauce" to Flathead's success is having fun.

"Our wrestlers just love to hang out with each other," he said. "I think we really don't have any hotrod athletes. Our wrestlers just love to come to practice every day and compete with their friends. The more fun they have, the more they will want to travel and get better."

"They are the definition of a family. Every club practice starts with a game of speedball along with yoga once a week. We encourage our wrestlers to play in the pool, play hacky sack, and even have teammates give each other mullet haircuts on trips. These kids just love to work out and practice every day."

"We also encourage our wrestlers to coach each other and support their Flathead family on and off the mat in the competition arena. We live in Northwest Montana, so every major competition is a 10-plus hour adventure in the club vans. Our wrestling success is a byproduct of just hanging out with their wrestling buddies. Really!"

Thompson believes that effective teaching is about "making a connection and building relationships. I eat lunch in my classroom, where kids join me to talk about wrestling and life. This is a huge wrestling community. Our kids are well-respected because they are just as passionate about the sport as in giving back through community leadership."

In essence, the Flatland Valley Wrestling Club's philosophy is that "there is more to life than wrestling but wrestling better prepares you for life. In all honesty, our goal as a club is to help turn boys (girls) into men (women), using wrestling as a vehicle in this process. Nothing gets you better prepared for success in life than the sport of wrestling. Life is tough just like wrestling."

His teams have included three of the four student class presidents and many other student council officers who are wrestlers in our club. Most wrestlers play a fall



(Flathead High photo)

**Jeff Thompson, a former Minnesota wrestler, returned to his native Montana where he has led both the Flathead High School boys and girls wrestling teams to multiple state championships.**

high school sport as well as watch and support their teammates in other activities. Each year, they place United States flags on Kalispell's main street and at the cemetery for Memorial and Veterans Days.

The Flatland Valley WC fields tough wrestlers at every level of the program. Ranked youth include Kellen Downing (12U 74 pounds) and Hunter Arriga (12U 86 pounds), as well as incoming freshmen Aiden Downing (106), Gannon Wisher (120) and Dane Lake (126). Current college wrestlers are Tucker Nadeau (West Virginia), Payton Hume (Providence), and Brendan Barnes (Minot State).

State high school returning placers this year included Logan Stansberry (120), Cade Gardner (126), Fin Nadeau (145), Anders Thompson (152), Cade Troupe (152), Jace DeShazer (170), Noah Poe-Hatten (170), Asher Kempainen (138), Gabe Lake (160) and Chase Youso (205).

Flathead's state champion girls team also returned six placers: Hania Halverson (113), Lily McMahon (120), Trinity Bolvin (126), McKenna McCarthy (145), Boston Howell (170) and Lucy Libby (205).

"We want our wrestlers to be successful on the mat," continues Jeff, "and we go to great lengths to make that happen. Many wrestlers in our club want to wrestle at the next level. Our wrestlers are willing to sacrifice a lot of their precious time to travel out of state to reach that national level in all three styles."

"Montana has struggled on the national scene the last few years since we have been focusing so much on folk-style wrestling vs. freestyle and Greco. In the 1990s, we would send five to ten Montana high school wrestlers to Division I programs each year on average due to our success at Junior Nationals."

"Now, we can barely field a full team for Fargo."

To counteract this trend, FVWC attracts wrestlers year-round by focusing on freestyle and Greco in the spring and summer, in addition to traveling out of state for several national tournaments, such as the 2021 RMN Aztec Warrior Championships, where the Montana club brought home the overall team trophy.

Although this was their first RMN event, Thompson says: "The kids are already addicted to the great show, the really tough level of competition, and the top-notch awards. They loved that the event was super fast-paced

without a lot of waiting around. RMN runs a highly-organized, first-class experience."

"It is my belief that to be successful in this sport, you need two things besides athletic ability. You need great coaches and great workout partners. In the Flathead Valley Wrestling Club room, you can't run from competition. We literally have dudes up and down the weight classes."

"At the same time, our philosophy is to take it slowly with our youth. Youth focus on just practice and local tournaments. Nine out of ten things we say to our wrestlers are positive. As they get older, we increase the mat time and competitions. Eventually they learn to practice on their own initiative."

"Most of our wrestlers don't hit the regional or national events until about seventh grade. As the wrestlers get to high school, it's full throttle, practicing 10-11 months and upwards of 100 matches a year."

Thompson also cautions against burn-out in wrestling.

"We're a team-first school," he said. "Success breeds success. We really want the wrestlers to improve, so we focus just on the basics, until they are mature enough to truly love the sport for themselves. You have to be self-driven to be successful in the sport."

"The motivation to attend practice, cut weight, go for a run, and get in a lift has got to come from your heart. You need that inner drive to be the best that you can be. It happens when kids get up at 5 a.m. for a run or put in an extra 100 push-ups. The secret sauce is where kids learn to do it for themselves and move beyond the parents' ego."

Thompson also said he enjoyed working with J Robinson Wrestling Camps when he was in college.

"I just fell in love with coaching wrestling and giving back to this amazing sport. I was also coached by the legendary Bob Zadick in Great Falls and saw how many kids' lives he influenced over the years."

"I love winning and am ultra-competitive, but in reality, the goal is to change kids' lives. I'm in the kid business and just want to help these young wrestlers find the work ethic, drive, sacrifice, and passion that this amazing sport has given me."

"I would not be the man I am today without this crazy sport!" ■