

Hawaiian wrestlers are proving they are not on an island with their success

By Bill X Barron

Every third weekend in March, 2,500 individuals and teams from more than 30 states descend upon Denver, Colo., for three great days of all-out wrestling. For the first time, the NCAA finals are one week after the RMN National Championships ... so no excuses to miss this event!

On Friday, the expanding duals competition will now feature girls in addition to middle and high school teams. Friday also includes freestyle, which is available to dual team competitors as well. Saturday and Sunday's individual K-12 and Open age-group bouts conclude with finals on raised MMA-style mats, which has previously matched three- and four-time high school state champions in the 18-&-Under Division.

For the Hawaiian national girls team, wrestling is 'ohana' (family). Girls wrestling in Hawaii was first sanctioned in 1998, with the unique concept that boys and girls — similar to tennis, track, and swimming — would compete side-by-side in the same event. Thus, wrestling on the islands represents the native warrior spirit, regardless of gender.

"Hawaii created a culture where girls can get tougher against other girls," Hawaii coach Kevin Grant said. "Wrestling here is 'ohana' — family. We feel it in our hearts. Because we are a community of islands, that builds a sense of unity, of belonging to our state, our island, our community, our club."

"We look out for each other," added national team member Taylar Hayase.

Team Hawaii brought 50 athletes, 24 of whom were girls, to the 2018 Western States Championships in Idaho. Though there were over 700 athletes from 14 states, several Hawaiian girls became individual champions: ten folkstyle, nine Greco, and nine freestyle titlists.

Earning Triple Crowns for winning all three styles were Waipuilani Estrella-Beauchamp (Jr., 132), Jahnea Miguel (Jr., 138), Bella Williams (Elementary, 73), and Jahlia Miguel (Elem., 93) for the girls, as well as Tyger Taam (Novice, 92), Oscar Williams (Schoolboy, 106), and Kahili Joy (Cadet, 120) for the boys. In Hawaii, the majority of competition is in folkstyle. The Hawaiian female athletes note that girls here are more experienced in freestyle, so they like to throw more!

After Westerns, eight females on the Hawaiian national team remained stateside in Colorado at the Sons of Thunder Wrestling Academy (SOT) to train for Fargo. One girl, Kapoina Bailey, a Hawaii Girls state champ at 168, not only plays as the only girl on the varsity football team, but also trained at the USA High School All-American Future Olympian Can-Am Rugby 7's Camp.

"(SOT) has welcomed us like family," said coach Grant.

Coach Nathan Williams, born on Maui and the national team leader, has spent the past year teaching along with wife Liza at SOT.

"I can have any idea — like housing and training our Fargo team for three weeks," Williams said. "While that may seem like a burden to others, to coaches Jeff Estrada and Luke Morris, it is an opportunity. If it involves wrestling, Jeff says 'yes' to anything involving kids getting better with their goals and dreams."



Taylar Hayase (left) was among 50 wrestlers from Hawaii who wrestled in the RMN Western States tourney.

Competing in the States is becoming more common for Hawaiian wrestlers. Western Triple Crawler Jahnea Miguel, who also played boys football in her youth, has competed several times in the elite Freak Show, jointly produced by RMN Events and NU-WAY. Not only is Jahnea impressed with the size of the event (3,500 competitors on 34 mats), but she also loves the "cool opening ceremonies" and appreciates that it is "one of the toughest and most competitive tournaments" in which she wrestles.

"We fly five hours; therefore, we are hungry, we want it," Western States champion Nanea Estrella said. "We have to work hard, fundraise; it is not handed to us. Our

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parents and community are great. They donate time and money to support our cause. We work harder in the room knowing others are breaking their backs for us.

"Waipuilani reminds us that our parents taught us it is not only about ourselves. Many families sacrifice their own needs, as well as organizing events such as bake sales of banana bread and smoked meat, in order to raise the more than \$2000 it costs to send each wrestler to Idaho, Colorado, then North Dakota for a month of wrestling."

These intrepid and articulate girls from Hawaii, every one a tough competitor, know they must have each other's back.

"I would not be part of any other team," Waipuilani declared. "And I would not be the person I am today without wrestling."

"If you don't work hard, the blame is on you. I learned through wrestling to face challenges, not to run away," Kapoina added.

"Wrestling has taught me self-achievement," said Roxie Umu, a 184-pound Hawaiian state champ. "Wrestling is like natural selection: only the fittest survive. It also teaches you integrity — there's no lying about what the scale says about your weight."

"The sport has taught me how to stay calm and approach a situation with my head when someone head snaps you," Nanea said. "There's no time to party. Wrestling sets you up for life: how to budget, discipline yourself."

"Life gives you the respect you earn," concluded Tianna Fernandez.

Each year over 400 girls from every Hawaiian island come together at the nation's largest all-girls tournament, the Pa'ani Challenge, where the organizers pay for all travel, meal, and lodging expenses. Although they are competitors on the mat, they are encouraged to practice with girls from other clubs and islands.

The tournament's mantra — "Nan 'Opio Kulana Ki'e" or "Are You Who Stand Majestic" — speaks to the way in which women as warriors are celebrated in the Hawaiian culture. Focusing on the character, forged through facing life's adversity, the tournament recognizes a young woman with the Most Heart Award, along with \$1,000 scholarship, for one who has overcome hardship.

"These girls have loads of talent, drive, and work ethic — but nowhere to show it except on the islands," coach Williams said.

For coach Grant, trips like these to the mainland are special because Hawaiian women grapplers "deserve more opportunity to experience success. On the islands, there are no camps, no recruitment. These women are warriors — it's part of our culture."

Waipuilani, who has also competed in Jiu Jitsu, quotes an ancient island saying: "Blood can make us related, but loyalty makes us family." ■

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