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A lasting North Coast tradition

by Jackie Christensen, 2/18/2006

High school level wrestling was first brought to the North Coast in 1958 when Del Norte head coach Mel Hurd created a team which competed only with schools along the Oregon border.

South Fork and Fortuna High both created teams to compete with Del Norte in 1962, and in the following years, St. Bernard's McKinleyville, Hoopa, Eureka and Arcata all followed suit, and the Humboldt-Del Norte League became an official wrestling league in 1966.

In the H-DNC's first league championship, Del Norte outscored Eureka by a single point and the first official league championship coach was Ron Kunstal.

In the beginning of H-DNC wrestling, the postseason competition consisted of a 16-team regional tournament, and a 16-team North Coast Section tournament.

In 1971, however, the NCS tournament replaced the regional tournament, and those who placed in the top three of NCS, advanced to the state competition. Today, the top four wrestlers in NCS advance to the state tournament.

In 1994 Southern Trinity formed a team to compete, but was forced to drop the program in 2002, and Ferndale's wrestling program began in 1996 and still flourishes today. In all, currently there are nine H-DNC high schools competing in wrestling.

Throughout the years there have been many outstanding local wrestlers who have gone on to win the NCS tournament, and even place in the top five at the state level.

No H-DN wrestler has ever won the state competition, but Arcata High's Garth Connors and Ron Perry placed second in 1984 and 1985, respectively, and in 1987 Arcata's Richard England also placed second.

All of these wrestlers were members of the Arcata dynasty that dominated high school wrestling during the 1980s.

Throughout the 1970s, Eureka was the premier wrestling program in the area. Under head coaches Jack Norton and Dave Earl, the Loggers won the H-DNC championship from 1972-1980.

Two Eureka wrestlers placed at state during that time with Rocky Harrison placing sixth in 1976, and Keith Hawks placing fourth in 1977.

Even though the Tigers flew under the radar in the 70s by not producing any league championships in the decade, what they were unknowingly beginning at the time was the greatest wrestling franchise in H-DNC history.

Former Arcata High student Bert Van Duzer graduated in 1975 after wrestling there for three years. After high school he spent two years wrestling at College of the Redwoods (which had a wrestling program from 1966-1982), and two years wrestling at Humboldt State (which had a wrestling program from 1959-1991) under head coach Frank Cheek.

Cheek, the current HSU softball coach, was inducted into the California Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2003. His wrestling teams won nine Far Western titles and earned 50 All-American awards. They also finished in the top five in five NCAA Division-III Tournaments, with a second-place finish in 1977. Cheek was also named the NCAC Coach of the Year three times, and the NCAA National Coach of the Year for Division-III in 1977. Coach Cheek was 261-107 in his career at HSU.

Van Duzer, who spent his senior year at HSU wrestling, going to school and also helping coach at Arcata High, brought the Cheek philosophy — the three Ds — to Arcata wrestling.

“Dedication, determination and desire,” Van Duzer said. “We had a focus and a coaching staff who set goals for the kids. We always tried to have fun and enjoy practice and we were very confident and worked hard to make ourselves better.”

After Arcata lost a dual meet to Eureka in the 1979/80 season (the same season Eureka won the league championship), the Tigers didn’t lose another dual meet in the 1980s.

The team won 13 consecutive league titles from 1981-1993.

Van Duzer was the unofficial head coach in the 1979/80 season, and in his 25 years as head coach at Arcata his teams have won 15 H-DNC championships.

The Tigers had seven wrestlers during the 80’s place in the State Championship.

In 1985, arguably Arcata’s strongest year, the Tigers had three NCS champions. Perry, one of Arcata’s toughest wrestlers, won NCS and lost the State Championship by a single point to a wrestler he later beat in college.

After graduating from Arcata in 1986, Perry attended Stanford University where he wrestled for four years building an 83-30 career record, collecting over 20 wins in each of his sophomore, junior and senior years. In his sophomore season he qualified for the NCAA tournament.

When asked what it was like being apart of Arcata’s wrestling dynasty in the 80s Perry said that, “high school wrestling during that time was pretty much a one-team show. There was an atmosphere of respect and hard work that really paid off for us. We were so secure in our knowledge that we could win the league, our focus wasn’t local, it was on the NCS tournament.”

After his wrestling career at Stanford, Perry helped as an assistant coach on the team for one year, then coached wrestling for two years in Palo Alto, then took the wrestling coaching job at Eureka High where he stayed for five years.

He created the local freestyle wrestling program which still exists, but no longer coaches wrestling in the area. He is, however, a full-time teacher at Eureka High.

“Being a wrestling coach is the hardest job I’ve ever done,” Perry said. “It’s harder than teaching, harder than going to Stanford, it’s mentally and physically draining and after five years I was worn out. That tells a big tale about how much energy and passion a coach like Bert has. He did it for 25 years.”

A significant amount of H-DNC coaches have come, in one way or another, from the wrestling programs of Cheek and Van Duzer.

Perry, along with Eureka’s current coach Keith Adams, and Arcata’s current coach Rob England all wrestled for Van Duzer during the 13-year reign of league championships. Former St. Bernard’s head coach Jason Stolpe also wrestled for Van Duzer, and McKinleyville’s former head coach Tom Pender, and current head coach Virgil Moorehead both wrestled under Cheek.

Van Duzer started the Humboldt-Del Norte Scholastic Sports Awards Fund with the Humboldt Area Foundation, which supplies medals for high school boys and girls in all the individual sports. He has also created the Oregon-California All-Star match, which takes place the second Saturday in March and features the 14 State Champions from California and

Oregon. He has enjoyed watching the alumni he coached become successful coaches of their own over the years.

He is also helping to increase Eureka's North Coast Classic tournament to include around 28 teams next year, up from this year's turnout of 19.

"Any sports that kids do are important," he said. "They learn about teamwork, goal setting, that hard work pays off and that everybody's individual contribution leads to a great performance. It seems like today, all kids want is instant success. Nobody is willing to go through that learning period to get better."

As a result of the sheer number of wrestlers in the league, probably the most competitive H-DNC wrestling was in the late 1990s.

"To win the league then was a great honor," Van Duzer said.

In 1999, under coach Perry, Eureka alone had a team of 49 wrestlers, compared to the average team in the 80s and even today's teams which consist of anywhere between 15-25 wrestlers.

The Loggers were league champions in 1999 and 2000, and featured outstanding individual wrestlers such as Jeff Brink, who placed seventh in the State Championship in 1998, and is currently wrestling for the Marines, as well as Kaci Lyle.

Lyle, who is probably the best known wrestler from the H-DNC, is a female wrestler who graduated from Eureka High in 2000, and currently resides in Colorado Springs, Co. She is a member of the U.S. Women's Wrestling Olympic team, a three-time U.S. Nationals runner-up who placed third in the 2004 U.S. Olympic Team Trials.

Though the popularity of high school wrestling has fluctuated throughout the years, peaking in the late 1990s, one thing has remained the same for the last 35 years, and that's the tradition.

There have been many speculations about the decline of wrestling's popularity, but no one can say for sure.

What we do know, is that with people like Van Duzer, Cheek, Perry, Adams, England and Moorehead, who are all still very much involved with local wrestling, it's only going to get better.

(Jim Sylvia's "History of H-DN Wrestling" contributed to this report.)