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Wrestling's continued growth in Lamorinda

By Jon Kingdon



Miramonte's Brody Suba

Photo provided



Claire Casado, Miramonte

Photo provided



Campo's Luke Hansen takes down his opponent.

Photo Eric Lowe

In this post-pandemic period, the number of wrestlers has increased exponentially. "Early in the season, we hosted the novice tournament at Campolindo, and it went really well," head coach Phil Freeman said. "There were a total of 230 novice wrestlers, about 55 of them being girls, which showed the strong growth of wrestling for the boys and girls in our area."

Campolindo

After finishing in third place last year at the NCS tournament, Freeman remains optimistic and has kept his eyes on the prize. "I still think we're the top team and we're going to be tough to beat though we may have some forfeits in the lower weight classes," Freeman said.

With three wrestlers coming over from the football team, seniors Gavin Juni (177-190), Shane Harris (215) and sophomore Luke Hansen (250), the team is well set at the higher weights. "We've continued to make inroads with football and we're getting some pretty athletic kids to come out for the team," Freeman said. "Gavin is the leader on the team and someone I'm hoping to see medal. Shane is lean and mean and Luke is doing very well. Garrett Joyce (145), a freshman, has shown good toughness and has competed against varsity wrestlers, and I expect him to turn out well." There are a number of wrestlers that Freeman will be able to call upon: seniors Daniel Thaler and Emilio Penate, juniors Emory Hsiao and Adam Barash and sophomores Soushians Bahramifar and Jack Simmons.

"The middle of the lineup at the 140's has a

bit of a log jam and is going to be contingent on who is healthy," Freeman said. "It's time to get everyone's weight set and that's going to be key for us. If we can shift our wrestlers around, we should be able to cover our weights."

It's a solid core of girls returning to the team. "Senior Piper Lalli just finished sixth at the Napa Valley tournament with five wins, and has really stepped up and should make the state meet," Freeman said. "Juniors Cami Baxter placed second last year and we're looking for her to go to state and K.T. Thompson, who lost in the blood round last year, is someone that could finish in the top four and go to state as well."

Isabel Zabronsky, who went to the state tournament as a sophomore, suffered a season ending knee injury. "Isabel will be back next year, and I fully anticipate her doing better than ever," Freeman said. "At this point, she's helping in different capacities and working out in ways that she can."

Freshman Maya Shu (110) and senior Nataliz Kalas (112) are also anticipated to do well in the upcoming dual matches and may be used to fill in to pick up some forfeit points when an opponent does not have a wrestler at a lower weight. "The girls have all improved in technique and physique, adding muscle and looking like wrestlers," Freeman said. "The mental aspect with a lot of stress they put on themselves adds another element. They want to win, and they do add some pressure on themselves."

Miramonte

Now in his third

year as the Miramonte head coach, Louis Suba has seen his roster grow each year from nine to 20 to this year's team, which numbers in the 40s. "A lot of our growth had to do with Hannah Rapp (2022-2023) due to her success the last couple of years, building a social media presence and a buzz around the school," Suba said. "I've gotten great support from the administration and the PE demonstrations I've done have also helped."

Right now, the team is comprised of 35 boys and 10 girls. "We're getting a lot of first-year freshmen, sophomores and juniors," Suba said. "I let the kids, and their parents decide whether they will wrestle at a particular tournament."

Zach Fineman (175-190) is captain and is the only fourth-year senior on the roster and that included two abbreviated seasons due to the pandemic and has been a key leader on the team. There has been a lot of individual success so far for the Matadors, led by Brody Suba, Owen Biedelman, Julio Villanueva, Owen Turtle and freshmen Finn Hura and Jaxon Ziehn.

Suba (132) came in first at the Pittsburg Tournament. Beidelman (165), a sophomore at the Colt Classic Tournament had four pins in 7:21 and scored the most team points with 30 and finished in third place. Suba and Ziehn both took first place at the Pittsburg Wrestling Tournament. Hura, who has a jujitsu background, currently has a 13-5 record and finished in second at the Colt Classic. Ziehn (120) finished in first at the Pittsburg Tournament and has a current record of 14-3.

Villanueva (126) with a strong off season has shown a lot of promise finishing third at the James Logan tournament. Turtle, a first-year junior already has six wins this season.

There is a core of first-year wrestlers that Suba is counting on in the future: freshmen Nolan Wagner, Geoff White, Rhys Williams, and sophomore Joe Young.

The girl's team is led by senior Izarra Ballesteros, sophomore Claire Casado, junior MaryAlice Cropsey, and freshman Cayleigh Farrar.

Ballesteros (135-140) has a 10-1 record and took first place at the Roger Briones and Dennis Solis Tournaments with three pins in 5:02. Casado (110), winless last season, has a current record of 10-7. Cropsey has been injured but has taken on the role of a leader, helping out in practice with the girls and the boys. Farrar came in first at the Gael Showdown and Dublin Tournament and currently has a 14-6 record. Olivia Park, a first-year sophomore has also shown a lot of potential. "With more experience, Claire has developed much better technique," Suba said. "Running cross-county has really helped with her conditioning."

This young team has grown a lot heading into the dual meet season. "Our improvement has been great because it's such a new sport for the majority of our kids," Suba said. "The amount of learning that is present during the season is the steepest learning curve imaginable. This is a sport that most of these kids have never even seen before, and they're thrown into the fire from

day one. It's like learning a new language almost four months later, the transformation is amazing."

Acalanes

It's been a homecoming for Acalanes head coach Steve Nelson, a former Don himself. Nelson was the head wrestling coach at San Lorenzo High School and it's a welcome change for him on a couple of levels. "There were times when I had to be something of a father figure for some of the wrestlers at San Lorenzo, but now I'm working strictly as a coach and don't have to worry about every aspect of my wrestlers' lives," Nelson said. "It's also cut down my commute each week by over 11 hours."

Nelson harkens back to his days as a wrestler for his coaching style.

"Growing up, I was coached with old school beliefs, and I still believe that works nowadays," Nelson said. "It's holding kids accountable, and I believe competition is the way to get the best out of my athletes, so we compete a lot. It's been a little bit of an adjustment for the team since they weren't necessarily used to somebody like me."

While some were unable to adjust, the Dons have 19 wrestlers on the roster, seven juniors and seniors and 12 freshmen and sophomores. There are three girls on the roster, though two are currently injured.

The boys are led by senior co-captain Dylan Potter (190), juniors co-captain Sam Whipple (215) and Ian Sanftner (175), and sophomores Kirian Gracie and Marley Oh. "Dylan has stepped up big this year

and I've been impressed with his leadership in helping his teammates to understand what we're doing in practice," Nelson said. "Sam has also taken it upon himself to become a leader and it's been thoroughly impressive to watch him. Kirian (120) was an NCF qualifier last year who may also wrestle at 115 and Marley has been a bright spot, becoming one of our better wrestlers being able to hear what I am telling to do in his matches, and it has led to some pins. Ian is extremely strong, and I have high expectations for him."

Senior Dakota Goyert (100) was close to medaling last season at the NCS and comes from a wrestling family with her dad serving as one of the team's assistant coaches. "Dakota has a good skill set and basic reference," Nelson said. "I'm working on expanding some of her moves and hope she can qualify for state, which I have done with two NCS champions at San Lorenzo, so I know what we need to do to get ready for it."

Senior LiLou Picard is out with a broken foot and junior Anya HaasHollenbeck has been ruled out for the rest of the season due to a concussion.

Nelson's ultimate goal is simple: "If I can get more kids returning next season than quitting, I will consider this a successful season. I was basically starting from scratch, and I was told that I might only have six or seven kids so for me to have 19 in the room, I'd say it's a pretty successful start to rebuilding the program."

Saint Mary's Basketball – a tale of two seasons

By Jon Kingdon

When the preseason prognosticators in the press declared that Saint Mary's was the favorite to win the WCC, it was something that head coach Randy Bennett did not trumpet himself.

After starting the season with a 4-5 record, Saint Mary's has won 10 of their last 11 games, opening up league play with four straight wins over San Diego (81-70), Loyola Marymount (68-64), Portland (95-52) and Santa Clara (73-49), who had defeated nationally ranked Gonzaga two days earlier, making the press look more prescient. "We had a lot of growth that needed to happen and there were some expectations on us that we just weren't ready for as a team yet," Bennett said.

Though there are a number of experienced players that returned this season, four of the five starters had hurdles they

had to overcome, which was not perceptible to the general public. The starting five of center James Saxen, forwards of Alex Ducas and Joshua Jefferson and guards Augustas Marciulionis and Aidan Mahaney all had adjustments to make from the start of the season.

"We had a lot of growth that needed to happen. Joshua and Augustus have come to grow into their roles as starters," Bennett said. "Alex spent the entire off-season trying to get healthy. He was out for four months, and it has taken him four months to get back and he's close to 100% now. Aidan's role this year is different with the graduation of Logan Johnson who shouldered a lot of the load for him, and he is now going against the best perimeter defender every night and we've asked Saxen to increase his scoring and

rebounding and he's been trying to do that. It's not a completed process at this point."

As the season was developing, the offense was not what Bennett had been anticipating: "That's what surprised me a little bit in that I thought we would have been further along offensively but we haven't put it all together yet. We turned the ball over way too much, but our field goal percentage numbers have gotten better (48.7) in nine of our last 10 games. As Ducas, Marciulionis and Jefferson have gotten better, we've gotten better offensively. I was careful not to get down on them because we've been playing tough games against high ranked teams. Aidan had a bad shooting streak early in the season, but he has been coming out of it and shooting better. Confidence can be a

fickle thing even for the best of them and he's fighting through it and he's going to be all right."

Starting league play, Bennett understood what the team needed to do to be successful. "We could not lose our identity of being a really good defensive and rebounding team and that's what we are right now. We had to be a better offensive team and the number one thing was taking care of the ball. That's why we've been good the last two years. We needed to keep getting better offensively without losing the other two factors."

After the slow start, the team's performance has made a big turnaround with everything coming together in the win over Portland last Thursday, with as balanced a performance as a team could have, both offensively and defensively. The Saint Mary's guards

scored 39 points, the forwards 40 points and the centers 16 points led by Mahaney with 25 points, Ducas with 17 and Saxen with 8. With only five turnovers, 25 assists, 40 rebounds and 10 steals, Bennett appreciated those numbers. "We played really unselfishly and defended well," Bennett said. "We try and hit those numbers and I was pleased with how our guys kept playing unselfishly."

Mahaney, who had been going through an uncharacteristic shooting slump, has come out of it with a vengeance in the last four games, connecting on 28 of 53 shots, averaging 18 points in those games.

Historically, the strength of a Randy Bennett team has been in areas other than offense as is the case this season. "We're really a good defensive and rebounding



Photo Tod Fierner

Head Coach Randy Bennett

team. (Saint Mary's is fourth in the nation – 59.1 ppg and 24th in the nation – 41.1 rebounds per game)," Bennett said. "We're 12-0 when we hold teams to 40% shooting or less. We're 1 and 6 when we don't. That's who we are. ... We're still gritty, not pretty."