



John William Howard/The Clackamas Print

Wrestling coach Josh Rhoden (left) shouts instruction to A.J. Ballard (right) as he attempts to wrestle his opponent to the ground. Rhoden has worked hard to get additional funding for the wrestling program, which is the only sport at Clackamas Community College that competes at the national level.

# Wrestling struggles to garner attention

By John William Howard  
Sports Editor

Late on a Friday afternoon, wrestling coach Josh Rhoden's office was empty and dark. Many of the students who made the building a bustling busy place had gone home for the weekend, leaving little to mask the shouts and squeaks of sneakers that echoed from the gym. Looking closer, Rhoden still couldn't be found. The court was taken up by a group of men playing pickup basketball; shirts and skins, but there wasn't a coach on the sideline.

Minutes later, one of the players drove the lane and scored a bucket, bringing the game to a close. At that point, one of the 'skin' players jogged over to the baseline, donned a grey shirt and held out his hand in greeting.

Rhoden, now sweaty but recognizable, smiled and remarked to the other players that they'd be back on the court in a few minutes. It was then that a few faces began to stick out, as many of the NJCAA's best wrestlers were now meandering around the gym. Martin Gonzalez, region 18 champion in the 133 lb division was sitting on the baseline. Trent Noon (both members of *The Print*), who won his weight class and took fourth place at nationals, conversed with several of his teammates.

The collection of talent and

the overall air of the gym during the scrimmage speaks volumes about the strength of the wrestling program and the coaching prowess of Rhoden. In an economy where schools are forced to cut anything they don't see as necessary, wrestling is often one of the early things to go, and to compete at a national level, there is an extraordinary amount of work that needs to be done. Rhoden hasn't built the program without a fight.

While Clackamas has had wrestling since 1971, it hasn't always been as good as it is now. Barring the national championship in 1971, there weren't many highlights up until 2007 when six wrestlers, tied with the most in school history up to that point, placed at nationals. Four years later, Clackamas took home their second national championship, a product of grit, hard work and fundraising.

This year, another step was made in the fundraising process.

The Cougar Classic grappling tournament was meant to be a new fundraising opportunity. Planned for Saturday, May 5, the tournament was sponsored by Team Quest, a mixed martial arts club in Portland, and CCC wrestling alumnus Matt Lindland, who won a silver medal in the 2000 Olympic Games.

"We were gonna try to get it off the ground this year," said Rhoden. "We've been working with Matt Lindland at Team Quest to get some things roll-

ing that can get some revenue streams in for the wrestling team just because we're underfunded."

While it isn't the most expensive sport at Clackamas, wrestling does spend more money than any other program on recruiting, much of which is fundraised by the program itself. That money, according to Rhoden, is crucial to compete with some of the other Midwestern junior college programs that have a much larger budget.

"It takes money. There's no other way to look at it," said Rhoden. "We've got some alumni that are supportive of trying to say 'Hey, let's look at creative ways to gain revenue streams.' We looked at the grappling event as one avenue, and we just didn't get the support we hoped for."

Struggling for support of a wrestling program is nothing new to the sport, as it isn't in the spotlight like basketball, football and baseball are. Calling wrestling a "fringe" sport, Rhoden said that most of the people that follow wrestling either participated in it, or had kids that wrestled. Community attention and involvement are low, but extending Clackamas' track record of victories and alumni support will breed success.

"It starts small. It's grassroots, but that's kinda where we're at right now," said Rhoden. "We've won one championship, and while that's great, it's gonna

take more winning and continuing success for people to keep coming."

Community involvement isn't the only challenge that wrestling faces. Because the sport isn't as well known, wrestlers are often lost to other sports like football and soccer. Rhoden said that wrestling loses countless recruits to the mainstream sports, especially heavyweight wrestlers to football.

"I wanted to do something hard, and wrestling is way harder [than football]," said freshman Jake Laden, who wrestled in the 285 lb division and won region 18 in his class. "It's also individual... I don't have to rely on anybody else."

Freshman Terrance Joshua agreed that he liked the individual aspect, and said that he enjoyed that he was able to control his own destiny when on the mat.

"With this, I can just come here and work my ass off," said Joshua, who is the only return-

ing wrestler in the 197 lb. division. "I can spoil in my own sweat, as opposed to going to university."

Laden and Joshua were just two of the many wrestlers that chose between wrestling and other sports, but Rhoden says that the rising popularity of mixed martial arts may give wrestling some traction. However, at the end of the day, Rhoden sticks by the idea that victories are what will ultimately make wrestling an attraction at Clackamas.

"We're gonna carve out our niche by winning. That's my mindset," said Rhoden. "I don't think there's any other practical way to look at it, just because we're a junior college. We're not a DI program, so you're not going to get the same kind of following. You struggle with alumni because they have attachments to four year programs, and so now we're just like 'if we win, they'll come.'"

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