

SPORTS

MARTIAL

Hermiston head wrestling coach Shaun Williams and Greg Cortaberria, a local national guard officer and supporter of local wrestling. Because wrestling is such an integral part of mixed martial arts, Cortaberria said they thought the perfect fundraiser would be to host a sanctioned card at the high school. Once the new fairgrounds are built, the event, if successful, will move there and become a local staple.

It wasn't a smooth process to convince the School Board to sign off on the event, however.

"It was like 'Gladiator,'" Williams said of the pitch.

The concerns centered

around the inherent violence of MMA and the desire to remove violence from schools. Williams said, to overcome the School Board's concerns, he came with research. He said he learned that some high schools on the East Coast have club MMA teams. High schools there host sanctioned MMA cards regularly, although that hasn't quite caught on out West yet.

Bobb said, initially, doubts about a high school hosting mixed martial arts events are common as the violent nature of the sport seems to disagree with what high schools stand for. He added, however, other sports, such as football, are violent in nature and are common at high schools.

Bobb said, overall, MMA is safer than football with 38 percent fewer injuries than

in high school football and 8 percent less steroid abuse.

With the event scheduled to take place, Williams said he hopes the team will raise enough money from the event to store in the wrestling program's account and purchase all sorts of things, from buying shoes for an underprivileged athlete, to taking his team to national tournaments so his wrestlers can get more exposure, something he said he really hopes to do.

Hermiston and Knucklehead Promotions have agreed the wrestling program will get \$5 per \$20 ticket. Williams said he has 1,500 tickets, and if the team were to sell half, that would net \$3,750 for the program.

His eventual hope is to help convince area colleges like Eastern Oregon Univer-

sity or Blue Mountain Community College to reinstate wrestling or for wrestlers to be recruited at the collegiate level. Currently, there are just seven colleges with wrestling programs in Washington, Idaho and Oregon.

"It's not enough," Williams said. "It's important to get our kids out there to where coaches can recognize the talent that they have and recruit them, and, not only that, I think, if we can demonstrate that Oregon does have the kids to compete at the next level, it will also boost getting wrestling back at BMCC. It will boost getting wrestling back at EOU."

The main event March 21 features a three-round bout between welterweights Jason Lambert (2-4) — who has fought in the UFC and is a

former WEC heavyweight champion — and Tyson Jefferies (11-9), who hails from Colorado and has competed in Bellator MMA, a lower level promotional company. Lambert last fought on Oct. 11, when he was TKO'd in the second round. Jefferies is coming off a win over Rocky Johnson with an arm bar submission in the second round at Knucklehead 10: United We Fight in Salem.

The co-main event, which will have three five-minute rounds, features two more welterweights: Mike Dubois (4-0) from Georgia and John Bartlett (1-1) from Oregon. In Dubois' last bout, he submitted Josh Snodgrass with just 27 seconds remaining in the third round by way of a choke. Bartlett lost his last match, just his second as a

professional, to Ryan Walker by way of a rear naked choke in Portland on Jan. 24.

Other fights include: Justin Milani (0-4-0) vs. Dario Mobley (2-5-0), Samuel Sprauer (2-1-1) vs. Ricardo Martinez (11-4-0), Michael Gonzalez (7-4-0) vs. Freddie "The Humble" Bailey (6-3-1), Chase Holiday (2-1-1) vs. Justin True (6-2-2), Mark Cano Jr. (1-0-0) vs. Morgan Mansken (2-0-0), Rafael Palma (3-0-0) vs. Ray Gonzalez (2-2-0), Wyatt Passentino (1-0-0) vs. Jesse Ibarra (0-0-0), Colby Grayson (2-7-0) vs. Brandon Miller (1-1-0), Andrew Perri (1-0-0) vs. TBD, Weston Simonis (0-1-0) vs. Brian Kama (0-0-0), Chris Evans (0-2-0) vs. TBD and Michael Collazo (1-1-0) vs. TBD.

Doors open at 6 p.m.

CHAMPIONS:

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produced seven individual champions. Williams was also named 5A Wrestling Coach of the Year for the 2014-15 season.

Williams said, for him, winning state championships isn't the most important thing to him. What's most important is his wrestlers perform to their best potential.

"The state championship is probably the most important event on the

calendar for you, hands down," he said Thursday. "I don't care what happened the rest of the season. So everything that we do during the season culminates at the state tournament. So there's no doubt about that. But, in terms of winning and losing, like I tell my kids: If the best that we can do is second, is fifth, we better take second or fifth. That's our goal. We need to live up to our potential."

Bob Coleman, who was the state runner-up at 170 pounds last weekend,

said it meant a lot to him and his teammates that so many peers and community members attended to congratulate the Bulldogs on their successful season Thursday afternoon.

He said, while the wrestling team has been dominant, an observation the eight titles in nine years supports, Hermiston athletics, as a whole, are just an indication of where Hermiston is as a community.

"With wrestling, we've found a little niche, like watermelons and Hermiston, where it's known everywhere and pretty frickin' amazing," he said. "I mean, everyone loves Hermiston watermelons. Hermiston wrestling — my freshman year, we were 25th in the nation in rankings. It's not all of Hermiston, but it's a good side of it."

Coleman said there are other teams that are just as successful and well known as the wrestling team, such as boys cross country team, which is known statewide, and the girls basketball team, which is the top seed heading into the state tournament. Then there's the football team, which won its first state

title in November in convincing and dominating fashion. He mentioned the speech and debate program, which, in just its third year, already has state champions, as well as the chess club, which is growing and quickly becoming successful.

"It's just showing that Hermiston's on the rise," Coleman said. "We have new schools in Hermiston. It's showing through the community's support. It's showing through the athletic programs."

Coleman said the full gym Thursday afternoon not only speaks to the level of support for the wrestling team and athletics as a whole, it speaks to the level of growth in the town.

"We won (a title) in football, and everyone's behind us," the junior said. "We win it here, and, as you can tell, everyone's behind us. It shows even through the community members, the school administration help us get this assembly done. The student body was here supporting us. It's a pyramid, and everyone is behind and they get behind every sport in Hermiston."



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Hermiston's Brock McDounough, who placed fifth at 160 pounds at last weekend's state tournament, walks into the Dawghouse to applause by community members and students.

LEARNING:

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two of them you can just show up and win. That's not the case against 5, 6A teams. You need to prepare well and play well."

Then, he said, on top of that, the Bulldogs had to play Pendleton, Hood River and The Dalles three times. Since the Columbia River Conference branched off from the Intermountain Conference five years ago, Hermiston has been in a four-team league that plays three league matchups. It eliminates any secrets a team might have and makes coaching that much more difficult, McElligott said.

"They counter what you're doing, and you have to counter the counter," he said. "It's a game of chess and adjustments."

The learning curve wasn't limited to just McElligott and his staff. He said his players had to learn new system, new plays and even had to relearn some ways of doing things on the court according to how McElligott wants the game to look and his team to play.

These aren't things that just happen overnight, he said: They take time to install and even longer for players to become comfortable with them.

"The thing is, to teach a style and system, sometimes it takes until the second or third year to put a system in place," McElligott said. "(Assistant coach) Dennis Stefani and I talked about this. It takes until the second year for

guys to know what we want from them."

Early on in the Bulldogs' season, the players didn't quite know what was expected of them. McElligott called those early season games "apathetic." In their first five games, the Bulldogs went 0-5 and were outscored 318-217, an average margin of 20.2 points. The offense was stagnated, and the defense lacked effort.

The Bulldogs finished the first month of the season with a record of just 2-7, and the season appeared to be getting away from them.

Things were at their worst when a winless Sunnyside team came into the Dawghouse and shocked the Bulldogs with a narrow 47-45 win. Hermiston had the lead in the fourth quarter but couldn't hold it against a hungry Sunnyside team. After that, things started to change. Games were tighter for longer and a spark emerged that wasn't there early in the season.

"You could tell that they didn't like to lose," McElligott said of his players. "They would go down 10 points — in (the playoff game against Sandy) they went down 10 points in the first quarter and came from way back. They showed fight and a lot of character. They showed fight and toughness. I thought we did finish strong and continued to fight and claw black into games. That's a sign of improvement: that a team has heart and character."

Though Hermiston won its first two league games over The Dalles and Hood River Valley — and found



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Austin Nailon (10) of Hermiston rises for a layup as Hood River Valley's Tyrone Stintzi watches during the first half of their Columbia River Conference basketball game Jan. 30 in the Dawghouse.

itself atop the CRC rankings in the process — it couldn't keep that momentum down the stretch. After the 2-0 start, Hermiston lost four of its next five and split its final two games of the regular season to put the Bulldogs in third in the CRC and on the road for their play-in game. The Bulldogs went to Sandy and went cold down the stretch in a 46-42 loss Tuesday.

"They left the door

cracked, and we couldn't kick it down," McElligott said.

Despite the disappointing finish, McElligott said the loss hasn't diminished his players' enthusiasm. He said many are clamoring to play basketball, to know the spring, summer and fall basketball schedule.

"Guys are really excited about what's next," McElligott said. "It's good to have that hunger back."

BULLDOGS:

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of Hermiston's record (and) what they were doing. It was all about Silverton, and now it's back to all about La Salle."

"They took all the first place votes, and we haven't lost any games (since we beat La Salle)," Hoffert continued. "That's fine. It's not that that runs us or drives us, but it's what's going to be in the back of our minds from this point on."

Before Hermiston gets its second shot at La Salle, however, the Bulldogs must first earn a spot in the final field of eight in Corvallis next week by winning their home play-in round matchup against 16th-seeded Crescent Valley of the Mid-Willamette Conference today.

The Raiders are 10-14 (6-8 MWC) — ironically the same league in which Silverton competes — and are in the playoffs despite suffering through an eight-game losing streak that started in December and sprawled into January. Crescent Valley topped North Eugene 45-41 — a team Raiders lost to during their eight-game skid — in a mild upset to earn its spot against top-ranked Hermiston.

In all honesty, Hoffert doesn't care much about what Crescent Valley does. Not that he knows very much. He said it has been a struggle for him to learn anything about the Raiders, but he's focused on doing what got his team to the top-ranked position in the state: run, defend, be relentless.

"They're gonna have to stop what we do," Hoffert said. "We're gonna do what we do full speed the entire 32 minutes, and we're gonna see if they can do that for 32 minutes. I don't know if they can play that way for 32 minutes. Like I said, they're gonna have to come here and stop what we do well, and we're not gonna allow that. We'll make adjustments on their scorers, find out who those are and find out their key players and make sure those key players don't score, and we'll shut them down and let them deal with their problem facing us because they're gonna have a tough time matching up with all five girls on the floor."

Hoffert said, in a way, La Salle being ranked first both motivates the Bulldogs and takes pressure off them, similar to what happened with the Hermiston football team. At that time, the team flew under the radar as Silverton was prematurely crowned champion in September and used that perceived slight as motivation. Then the Bulldogs unseated Silverton when it counted.

Hoffert said fans can expect the same from the girls basketball team.

"Everything's coming together for us," he said. "We expect to make a deep run and to be playing Friday (March 13). We expect to have a shot at what we've been working for all year. ... Anything can happen, but we expect to be in that position."

Tip-off to today's game starts at 3 p.m. Gates open at 1:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$6 for adults and \$4 for students.



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Hermiston's Tavin Headings (22) moves in for a basket against Hood River's Breanna Weekly (43) and another defender during the first half of a Columbia River Conference girls basketball game Feb. 10 in Hermiston.

WINNERS:

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his army with many a war elephant from present-day Tunisia to Rome, crossing the Alps to get there. Most

of his elephants died in the mountains, and his army was obliterated by the Romans, but the Roman generals still wrote of him as great in their memoirs — even though his decisions were bad

and his tactics worse — so they could be remembered in higher regard for their military prowess.

Williams does the same but the opposite. That's only part of his program, though.

Acting with class is something each of the wrestlers possesses. They aren't show-boaty, and they aren't overly cocky either. For how successful the program is in terms of banners and

trophies, it's even more successful in building a program the right way and building men the right way.

"(Hermiston) likes competitors, but they also like people who put Hermiston in a

positive light," Williams said. "They're good ambassadors, is really what my kids are."

— Sam Barbee is the Hermiston Herald sports reporter. He can be reached at sbarbee@hermistonherald.com