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## **Prep sports: Holthaus pins down her wrestling goals**

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Rachael Holthaus is growing tired of being called a "girl wrestler." If the Royalton sophomore had it her way, she would drop any reference to her gender from that monicker and would be known only as a wrestler.

And a good one, at that.

Competing in a sport normally reserved for boys, Holthaus takes a 16-2 record into tonight's Section 6A quarterfinal match against Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa at Royalton. The fact that some coaches scoff at her presence on a boys team is no more than a nuisance.

Despite her gaudy record in the 103-pound weight class, there are still male opponents who cannot accept losing "to a girl" and react to losses like the world is going to end tomorrow.

All that is fine with Holthaus, who realizes the only way she can change the perception that she doesn't belong is to keep working hard.

And winning.

"It seems like some of the coaches are more against me being out here than the wrestlers," said Holthaus, who has received three forfeits this season from opponents who chose not to compete against her. "I try not to think about it, because it's not going to matter. I don't care if they don't think I should be there."

After watching Holthaus practice and talk about wrestling, it is obvious the sport is a passion and not a way to pass the time until spring. In fact, the high school season is only a small part of her wrestling schedule.

She comes from a family with an impressive wrestling pedigree. Her father, John, was raised in a family with four wrestling brothers. Rachael's cousin, Jason Foss, won a state championship at Royalton. She also is a distant cousin with Ryan Holthaus of Foley, who is ranked No. 1 in the state in his weight class.

Holthaus admits to a shy personality before trying wrestling. Those days are long gone.

More than qualified

Holthaus is serious about wrestling, and her credentials prove it.

The 16-year-old started wrestling in fourth grade and has been competing ever since. The competitions started with Little Falls Jaycees tournaments and eventually evolved into national-level tournaments. She learned a few of tricks with a freestyle club called the Bobcats in Little Falls before eventually making the varsity team there as an eighth-grader.

Last season, Holthaus competed in about half of Little Falls' varsity meets as a freshman. She transferred to Royalton when her father, John, who comes from a wrestling-rich family, was named head coach of the Royals about two weeks before the high school

season began.

For the past three seasons, Holthaus has been the only female member of the 120-wrestler Highflyers Wrestling Club in Wayzata. There, her skills improved dramatically while being coached by Brandon Paulson, an Olympic silver-medalist in Greco in the 1996 Summer Olympics, former University of Minnesota national champion Brandon Eggum and All-American Chad Erikson, who was a four-time state high school champion at Apple Valley.

"They've done a great job with her," Rachael's high school coach and father, John, said. "They've accepted her, and I'm very happy with that. She's learned a lot there."

All that instruction and hard work have paid big dividends. Holthaus is ranked No. 1 in the nation in her weight class among females in both freestyle and folkstyle (which is similar to high school).

At the Junior Nationals last July in Fargo, a girls competition was added for the first time. Holthaus won the 95-pound weight class in that tournament, where 47 states were represented. She also placed third at a national girls folkstyle tournament in Detroit last March and will return to that tournament again this year. In the first week of March, Holthaus will compete in a prestigious freestyle event in Sweden where 30 countries will be represented.

"As a father, I was a bit apprehensive about her being in wrestling at first," said John, a 1979 Royalton graduate who wrestled for the Royals. "I didn't know how to deal with it or how people would react. But I realized quickly she enjoyed it, and she's my daughter, so I'm going to do what I can to help her. She's got a lot of natural ability, and once she started winning, I figured I'd really grab onto this and help her."

"The opposition (to her wrestling) has been far less than we expected. The school has been great, and so has our team and fans. They figured out she's not just a girl out there taking up space. She goes out on the mat, works hard and wins. When she's out there, it's not a boy or a girl thing. They're all wrestlers. The biggest problem we've had is parents who don't want their son to get beat by a little girl"

In the early stages of tournaments against boys, Holthaus was simply overpowered. That forced her to learn the many intricacies of the sport, and her father said that knowledge has made her a technician on the mat.

While Holthaus' major focus continues to be the girls-only national-level competitions, she has enjoyed her success and experience competing at the high school level. Which raises an interesting possibility.

With her record, Holthaus likely will receive a No. 2 or 3 seed in the Section 6A individual tournament Feb. 21-22 in Rush City. Should she win or place second there, Holthaus would become the first girl to compete at the state high school wrestling tournament, which was started in 1938.

That could create quite a stir at the already frenzied three-day event. The media spotlight would likely be on her, but she doesn't see that as pressure.

"The goal is definitely to make it to state," Rachael Holthaus said. "I really want to go there. I think it would be neat. But I don't want to go there as the first girl to make it. I'd rather just go as a wrestler. It's nice and flattering to be recognized, but I don't want to be singled out."

With no time to rest after the high school season < with or without the state tournament < Holthaus said she already is prepared for the national and international events. Tournaments such as those, she hopes, will lead her to even bigger things, like the Olympics, which will have women's wrestling for the first time at the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, Greece.

"That's my goal," Holthaus said.

And she doesn't care who doubts her.