

On the mat for 50 years

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"More enduringly than any other sport, wrestling teaches self-control and pride. Some have wrestled without great skill — none have wrestled without pride."

Those are words from Dan Gable, one of the greatest American-born wrestlers of all time, an Olympic champion in 1972 and three-time NCAA champion at Iowa State University.

For 50 years, the Prior Lake wrestling program has embodied Gable's words. The Lakers have had a lot of highs, a few lows, 11 individual state champions and seven state team appearances since 2006.

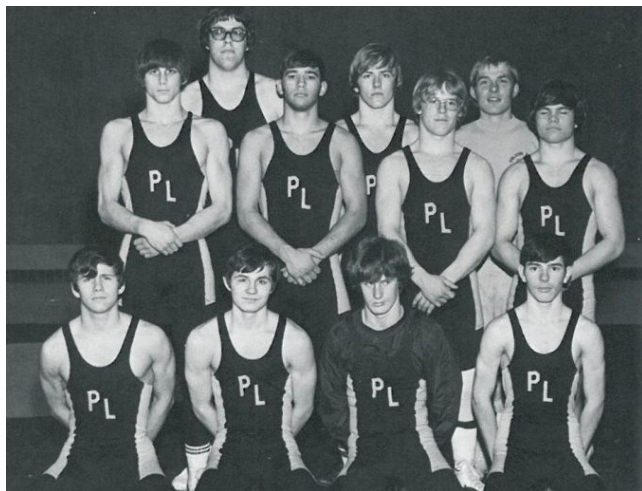
This season is the 50th anniversary of Prior Lake wrestling. And for a half of century, the Lakers have wrestled with pride, whether that's been under legendary coach Ron Edwards or current leader Joe Block, a three-time Class 3A Coach of the Year winner.

"This program has had a lot of success," said Chad LeMair, the President of the Prior Lake Wrestling Club the last seven years and former Laker state champion. "I think we've done things the right way. Joe is a great leader. It's amazing what he's been able to accomplish with this program."

If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a lot of volunteers to make a wrestling program stand out. LeMair said the Laker have been fortunate over the years to have a lot people, former Lakers, parents, giving their time to make the programs one of the elite ones in the state.

Prior Lake went into its 50th season this winter having won five straight Section 2AAA titles, while earning five top-three finishes in the Class 3A state team tournament, including a program-best runner-up in 2014.

Back on Dec. 11-12, Prior Lake had a home dual with Rosemount and its annual Ron Edwards Duals the next day. The two days also celebrated 50 years and many alumni came back to support the



1974-75 Lakers

The 1974-75 Prior Lake wrestling team is regarded as one of the best Laker teams ever. Members are, front row, from left: Bill Sauter, Dan Sauter, Hubie Gorackie and Mike Koppen. Second row: Bill Dent, Mark Beaudette, Bruce Johnson and Bill Craven. Third row: Jim Busse, Dale Zywicki and coach Ron Edwards.

program.

It was like one big family with wrestlers from the 70s, 80s, 90s and 2000s all there.

Prior Lake's first season was in 1966-67 where it had three wins. Edwards took over the program in 1969 and guided it until 1977, earning 95 victories. After a two-year hiatus, Edwards returned as coach for another 13 years before retiring in 1991.

Edwards ended his career with 201-118-7 overall record, having coached four individual state champions.

Jim Busse, a 1975 graduate of Prior Lake, said Edwards had a huge impact on him and the rest of his teammates.

"Coach Edwards taught us work ethic, how to set goals and achieve them and how to be a man on and off the mat," said Busse, who wrestled and played football in college at North Dakota. "He had a great impact on me. He and I became good friends and we maintained that friendship until he passed away."

As good as Prior Lake has been on the mat the last decade, it's been said the Lakers' 1974-75 team may have the program's greatest.

That squad had six state qualifiers out of 12 weights and two individual champs in Bruce Johnson (145 pounds) and Bill Craven (138), while Busse was runner-up at heavyweight.

In the summer of 1974, the Minnesota State High School League changed the state format from a points system earned by wins at each weight class to a dual-meet tourney.

Fridley won first state team title in that format in 1975. But Busse said if it was a points tourney, the result would have been different.

"If the points system would have stayed, we would have been state champs," said Busse. "There's no doubt about it. We would have ran away with it. We were not as strong in the lower weights, but we dominated at the top. Fridley beat us in the [Region 4] championship to go to state."

The Lakers went 13-1-1 in duals that year. Fridley had three individual state qualifiers with two finishing in the top three. That wouldn't have been nearly enough to beat Prior Lake's two champs, runner-up and three other wrestlers earning points.

"We had a ball that year," said Busse. "We were a very close team. When we got on the mat, we were a determined bunch."

From 1969 to 1976, Prior Lake had a dual-meet record of 85-15-2.

In the 1980s, the Lakers had just one state champion — LeMair in 1986. He won the 112-pound Class 2A title. He was also runner-up the year before at 105.

The Lakers' program had six losing seasons in the 1980s and five more in the 1990s. But Prior Lake was facing some elite competition in the old Missota Conference with the likes of Apple Valley and Simley.

"The 1980s were rise of Apple Valley and Simley as powers," said LeMair. "We had some good teams, some great wrestlers. But those two programs stood out."

Apple Valley has had made the state team tournament every year since 1983, winning titles in 1983, 1985 and 1986. Simley, led by the late legendary coach Jim Short, won three straight crowns from 1987 to 1989.

"We were in the middle of pack most of time," said LeMair. "We were not competing for a section title year in and year out like we do now."

Wrestling was changing in the 1980s. It started to evolve into a year-round sport. Programs used to have two or three coaches in the program from top to bottom. Now, there are multiple coaches and volunteers at all levels.

Busse said Edwards started to get involved with him in wrestling, as well as his future teammates, in the sixth grade. Today, the Prior Lake Wrestling Club has programs for kids before kindergarten.

LeMair said it can be challenging finding coaches and volunteers, along with coordinating practices and tournaments for the lower levels, as well as the many fundraisers and camps.

"It's almost a full-time job," he said. "But the more coaches you have on the mat the better your kids will be."

LeMair said there wasn't the overall commitment and structure at the youth levels in the program in the 80s and 90s like there is today.

When Block became the coach in 2001, he took over a team that won six duals the year before. In Block's first three seasons, the Lakers had a 6-67 record.

Prior Lake earned 13 wins in 2004-05 and went 20-7 the next year to earn the program's first-ever state berth. The team got back to state 2008, before going on its run of five straight berths starting in 2011.

LeMair said Block is not only a tremendous coach, but is also a great leader at all the levels.

"He's on the mat with these kids," said LeMair. "He involved in the youth programs. He doesn't overreact to things. He's so committed to this program. He's done an amazing job."

Busse also has a tremendous amount of respect for what Block has been able to accomplish in his tenure.

"When Joe came on, to me, he was like Edwards," said Busse. "He got the team focused and

determined. I would have loved to see Ron and Joe coaching together. What a great tandem they would have made."

Block has averaged 23.3 dual wins the last five years. He entered this season with 245 career wins. He's also coached five individual state champs, including two-time winners Jake Kahnke and Alex Hart.

Kahnke and Hart are the only two Lakers to win two individual crowns. Kahnke won the Class 3A 189-pound title in 2007 and the 215-pound crown in 2008. He was a combined 94-0 those two years and is still in Prior Lake's all-time wins leader (193).

Hart won the 220-pound title in 2014 and the heavyweight crown in 2015.

Luis Pinto won the heavyweight crown in 2014, while Calvin Wolff won the 135 pound title in 2007.

Other state champs for the Lakers: Ryan LeBeau in 1999 (130), Cory Forar in 1997 (189), Bill Sauter in 1974 (126) and Brad Thompson in 1969 (98).

Thompson's brother, Bruce, was fourth at state in 1969 in his senior year. The Thompsons are also seen as sort of the Fathers of Prior Lake wrestling. The Lakers' first-ever coach — and there have been eight in team history — was Gene Nei, who coached two years (1966-68).

Bruce Thompson was a member of the 1980 Olympic Wrestling Team. He was honored at a dinner and awards ceremony in Las Vegas back in September commemorating the 35th anniversary of the XXII Olympic Games in Moscow.

The event honored the 20 members of the 1980 team, 15 who were present, as lifetime members of the International Fraternity of Wrestlers. That 1980 team didn't get to compete in the Olympics due to the United States-led boycott of the Games.