

End of a prized experience

Lakeside wrestling coach will take on new challenge

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He built the Lakeside (Nine Mile Falls) wrestling program nearly from scratch into one of the state's best on ambition and dreams. Now Scott Jones is entering the final stages of one successful career as he anticipates taking on another.

At the end of this year, Jones will leave teaching and coaching a sport he nurtured from the grassiest of roots, to pursue business by joining VEBA Service Group, a health-reimbursement business that helps government entities set up trusts to cover medical expenses or health insurance for retired public employees.

"Next to wrestling, my next passion workwise would definitely be in the finance world," said the Lakeside coach and business teacher-cum-administrator.

As wrestling coach, Jones has, at Lakeside, built a program to envy. The Eagles have won five state team titles and are working toward possibly another. They have had 16 individual champions and numerous other top-eight medal winners.

Jones said he will approach his new career with the same zeal he has in the wrestling room since being hired at Lakeside 17 years ago. Those who know him don't doubt it.

"It's a new chapter in his life," said East Valley wrestling coach Craig Hanson, a good friend and longtime contemporary. "But having known him all these years, it's not the first time it crossed his mind."

Still, it has to be hard for someone to walk away from his identity after giving of himself for so long to so many.

"It will be unbelievably hard for a number of reasons," Jones admitted.

Besides the relationships developed with his wrestlers and community, Jones said, "People I coach against are my best friends. That's a really tough thing and something I worry about."

With his son, Levi, wrestling as a freshman at Boise State and younger daughters involved in athletic careers, Jones decided the time was right for a career switch and new challenge.

Challenges are something on which Jones has thrived. As both a North Voice and wrestling writer at The Spokesman-Review since 1992, I've gained glimpses into Jones' remarkable story.

While writing about his nephew, two-time Lakeside state champion Matt Westenfelder, Jones revealed that he and two sisters were orphaned as youngsters when their parents died in an airplane crash. That tragedy helped formulate his life's philosophy that stresses devotion to family, both immediate and the extended one built in wrestling.

He considered it a privilege to be able to coach his sister Sheryl's son – "blood" as he put it. But his drive in the wrestling room was not entirely for the reasons one might expect.

"People see us as a strong wrestling school," he said. "But I hope they see most of all my true passion behind the program. It's directed at producing great individuals. It's an opportunity to fine-tune them to become finer young men. That really is the legacy."



There have been plenty of trophies for Scott Jones and his teams during his career. This collection is from the past two seasons. (Dan Pelle The Spokesman-Review)

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He succeeded with an ability to motivate that transcended even his ability to teach the sport.

"It's getting people to believe in themselves," Jones said. "I've faced tough times when I thought for sure I was going to lose and had to work my way into believing I had a chance that I could win."

His ability to impart that belief and instill an ethic of hard work still sticks in the mind of Lakeside's second state champion, Terry Jolley, who teaches and coaches wrestling in Kellogg.

"I always thought he should have gone into motivational speaking," said Jolley. "At the drop of a hat he can captivate an audience. He never accepted the words, 'can't' or 'I'll try.' He expects you to feel highly of yourself, not just in wrestling, but in everything."

Jolley was in the eighth grade and his dad had begun coaching the youth program the year before Jones arrived at Lakeside. He learned firsthand the drive and intensity of a 26-year-old seeking his niche. Jolley and a buddy talked about how they were going to win state titles. Jones worked them over during a practice session to show them how much work, not talk, it would take. Goals, he stresses, are not attained immediately, but long term.

Wrestling at Lakeside is nearly year-round, what with the regular season, freestyle tournaments and summer camps. That work ethic paid dividends with Jolley's 1994 title and a subsequent college career, and it has lifted Lakeside's program to the heights.

No other local school has won as many team state championships. No other school has had as many individuals (12) win titles. University is the only other to duplicate the total of 16 individual championships.

"When you look back," said Jones, "it's humbling. One of the beauties at a school our size is that (big schools) have been good to us in Spokane and keep inviting us to wrestle them. Because of that we get to measure ourselves as part of the best region in the state for wrestling."

Jones was brought on board by then-athletic director Glen Payne during the formative years of Lakeside High.

"I was probably overzealous when I came here, thinking I could make a non-wrestling school into a wrestling school in a year," Jones said.

The first year the Eagles were winless. Surely, with the help of superb assistant coaches and community opinion, Lakeside became a wrestling school.

Hanson was his assistant after being head coach in Wapato, Wash. He recalled that there were worries that two philosophies might clash.

"We sat down to lunch and within minutes hit it off," he said. "To this day, we're still best friends and collaborate a lot on what we do. A lot of years our teams mirrored each other."

Bart Orth won the school's first individual state title in 1993. Last year Levi Jones and Jon Millard became the most recent champions. Levi's win was an emotional high point for father and son, who are also the best of friends.

The Eagles will be in a three-way battle for the State 1A title this year and Feb. 17 in Tacoma will be another emotional milestone when Jones steps away from something that has been a huge part of who he is.

"I will continue to help as a booster and with local clubs," he said. "Once it's in your blood, I don't think you ever get to leave it. It's a fabric of what makes me up. It's a part of who I am."

The greatest thing about wrestling, Jones said, is what it teaches the athletes. He relates stories to current team members of those who preceded them and didn't believe in themselves but learned to achieve. It has helped perpetuate Lakeside's legacy.

"Hard work can help make dreams come true," Jones said. "It's about getting people to hopefully apply the skills they learned into their personal careers – and more importantly to their families."

All that he taught and witnessed will carry over as he embraces a new profession. Jones will be missed when he leaves his current one.