

What it was like in the beginning 1956-57 through 1971-72

The first season (1956-57)

In the fall of 1957, the News-Sun noted that last year Newport's wrestling was on an intramural basis. Juniata Joint, which had a varsity team since at least 1956, demonstrated wrestling techniques during an assembly in the Newport high school auditorium to generate interest. Newport later did the same at Susquenita in either 1958 or 1959, moving the sport down the Juniata River. Susquenita participated in their first section tournament in 1960 and their first match with Newport was during the 1960-61 season.

Scrimmages were held during the 1956-57 season with Boiling Springs (a loss) and in March with Green Park High School (now part of West Perry). Newport won 39-4 and a dance was held immediately after the competition. The team also entered the section tournament, with Kermit Harry winning Newport's first varsity match in the 95 lb. semi-finals.

A substantial intramural tournament was held at the end of the season. Twenty-one weight classes were contested - ten on the senior high level and eleven in junior high. There were as many as 16 wrestlers in a weight class. Preliminary matches were conducted in gym classes and during the school noon period. The finals were held on the evening of Wednesday, April 3, 1957, in the high school gymnasium. Trophies were awarded to the champions. Admission was \$.15 for students and \$.35 for adults, with proceeds going to the varsity club fund. Three future District 3 champs won junior high titles.

The first coach (Bob Craig)

Bob Craig attended Lock Haven State Teacher's College on a gymnastics scholarship, having led his Pottsville High School team to a state championship with two individual gold medals. He befriended wrestlers there and was convinced to try the sport out, not having wrestled in high school. Coach Craig not only lettered in wrestling but won a Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference (PSACs) title, being named outstanding wrestler of the tournament, his senior season in 1953 and advanced to the quarterfinals of the NCAA tournament. He earned a total of 18 letters in five sports at Lock Haven - football, gymnastics, track and field, swimming and wrestling.

A friend told Coach Craig Newport was looking for someone who would coach both football and wrestling. He really wanted to coach his favorite sport - football - but also found it appealing that Newport needed someone to start their wrestling program. Ironically, Coach Craig struggled in football with three losing seasons, but the wrestling team excelled with a two-year varsity record of 19-5 under his direction. As the Patriot-News observed in 1990 about his start at Newport when reporting that Coach Craig had reached the 400 win mark: "Craig laid the first bricks on a wrestling program that grew to be among District 3's best in a short time."

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Being a physical education teacher, Coach Craig had an advantage in recruiting wrestlers for the team. He reportedly gauged the wrestling potential of an athlete by his gymnastic abilities.

Practices

Practices for the senior high program were held in the school cafeteria, which was across the hall from the gymnasium (now the old gym). The basketball teams had full control of the gym for after-school practices. Matches were, of course, held in the gym. From the very beginning in 1957, dual meets were normally held Thursday and Saturday evenings. This held true through the end of the formative years in 1972 and beyond.

Mats

The first mats were made of horsehair. Yes, canvas rectangular sleeves (something like 6' x 8') stuffed with very course horsehair that were laid side by side for practices. For dual meets, a dozen or so were laced together and a plastic cover/tarp stretched over them. These mats were prone to having random hard and soft spots and have been said to be hard to shoot takedowns on. Because the mats were not covered for practice mat burns were an issue. But then when covered, it has been said the plastic could buckle and bunch up, causing a trip hazard; and a sweaty body could well sail across it like a slip and slide water attraction. These were the only type mats Newport had until the 1962-63 season when a foam mat was purchased. Some of the old rectangular mats were still around in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Uniforms

The first uniforms, purchased late in the 1956-57 season were three-piece - tights over the legs, a top that wrapped between the wrestler's legs with connectors in the front, and tight shorts. The weight class of the wrestler was located at the bottom of the left leg of the shorts. The tights and tops were blue and the shorts grey. No school or team name appeared on the uniform. New uniforms were purchased for the 1966-67 season; same style with blue tops and tights again, but white shorts that were a bit longer in the legs; and Newport on the front of the tops. Two-piece uniforms were purchased for the 1970-71 season: blue tights and white one-piece combined tops and shorts with an N on the chest. Singlets without tights (blue with an N on the chest) were not worn until the 1978-79 season.

Match-day programs

Wrestling yearbook programs were published for home matches during the 1960s. The first one I have is from the 1960-61 season, the last from 1968-69, and one in between from the 1964-65 season. There likely were yearbook programs in the intervening years also. They all include a list of the present high school administration; present and past coaches; team match

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scores from all prior years along with team accomplishments; section champs; district champs; regional champs; and state runner-ups. All also include the applicable match and team scoring systems. The 1960-61 and 1964-65 ones include anticipated line-ups for Newport and the opposing team; and a grid to keep the meet score like on a baseball scorecard. The 1965-65 and 1968-69 programs include a list of district runner-ups and the state champ. The 1968-69 yearbook includes a list of wrestlers who had undefeated dual meet seasons and a written summary of the first 11 seasons. It is also just a yearbook: it does not include anticipated line-ups or a scoring grid. However, separate programs were made for distribution at matches that season with a score card with blanks for wrestler names and scores with team line-ups for each match as inserts to the program.

Weight classes

There were 11 high school weight classes in 1957; the lowest being 95 lbs. and the heaviest 185 lbs. The number expanded to 12 in 1960 when 185 was changed to 180 and an unlimited weight class was added. These weights held through the 1971-72 season. The weight classes were changed the next season and have been altered seven times since then (1988, 1995, 2002, 2006, 2011, 2020 and 2022). The only weight class that has remained constant since the first state tournament in 1938 is 145 pounds.

Some tournaments, such as the Clearfield Christmas Tournament in 1968, had an 88 lb. weight class. The Western Pennsylvania Independent Athletic League (WPIAL; PIAA District 7) crowned an 88 lb. champ through 1972. Clyde Cressler has stated that his father, in view of Clyde's small size, told him as an eighth grader when Coach Craig came to Newport that if he did not want to be a jockey, perhaps wrestling could be his thing. Most of the successful early wrestlers at Newport were in the light weights - nine of the first 11 Newport District 3 titles were by wrestlers in the first four weight classes.

Rules

Some rules were significantly different from 1958 to 1972 than exist now:

-) Wrestlers did not need to wear tops during matches until the 1961-62 season. Newport and most other teams did though.
-) Wrestlers did not need to wear headgear during matches until the 1968-69 season. Some did; but many wrestlers have cauliflower ears because headgear were often not used during practices.
-) There was no rule requiring that wrestlers be clean-shaven and well-groomed until the 1968-69 season.

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-) Wrestlers started the neutral position on opposite sides of a ten-foot center circle. The three-foot neutral start lines were established before the 1983-84 season.
-) There were two lines twelve inches apart in the center of the ten-foot center circle ahead of which and behind which a wrestler's hands and knees were to be placed in the down position starting in the 1968-69 season.
-) Only the first takedown was worth two points, with subsequent takedowns only worth one, for the four seasons from 1961-62 through 1964-65, when all takedowns became worth two points again. I understand the change in 1961 was prompted by the collegiate success of Oklahoma State. They dominated by using a take'm down-let'm up strategy and other teams did not like that. Imagine that if you would: disincentivizing the takedown.
-) Predicaments were only worth one point until the 1961-62 season, when they became worth two. I guess to make up for taking a point away for subsequent takedowns. Glad this one stuck.
-) There was riding time. One point could be earned until the 1965-66 season, when two points could be earned. This rule was not eliminated until the 1973-74 season.
-) Figure fours on the body were legal throughout the time period, but body scissors were illegal. The opposite is now true.
-) The double chicken wing (that's a bar arm with the arm extended from the body on both of the opponents arms; sometimes called the overhead double-arm bar) were legal until the 1961-62 season. The single chicken wing remained legal, but was made illegal later, believed to be sometime in the 1970s.
-) Only first period falls were worth six team points through the 1970-71 season; falls after the first period were worth only five team points. Starting in 1971-72 all falls became worth six points.
-) All decisions were worth three team points until the 1971-72 season when four team points began to be awarded for a superior decision of 10 or more points. This was changed before the 1985-86 season to establish four-team point major decisions for an 8-14 point differential win and a five-team point technical fall and match termination for wins with a differential of 15 or more with a near fall. The near fall requirement was later eliminated.
-) Dual meet matches could end in a tie; there were no overtime periods. This did not change until the 1992-93 season, when overtime rules with a sudden victory

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period and a potential rideout period were made applicable to dual meets. They had replaced the criteria overtime rules in tournaments the season before.

-) Tournament matches had overtime periods if the match was tie after regulation. Before the 1971-72 season overtime was two one-minute periods with each wrestler starting on top once. That season overtime went to three one-minute periods, the first starting in the neutral position. All overtime periods were wrestled to decide the winner unless there was a fall.
-) There were possible referee decisions in tournament matches. That is, if a tournament match remained tie after overtime, the referees or referees and mat judges decided the winner. In fact, prior to the 1957-58 season, there were no overtime periods; if the match was tied a referee's decision was made after the three regulation periods. Criteria for deciding matches still tie after the three overtime periods were established before the 1976-77 season, but a referee's decision was still made if the multi-step criteria failed to clearly identify a winner. This was changed before the 1991-92 season in favor of the current overtime neutral start with sudden victory termination; the period lasting a maximum of two minutes. If the match is still tied, two 30-second periods from the down position are held. If the match remains tied there is a rideout period.
-) Dual meets could also end in a tie. Tie-breaker criteria were not established for dual meets until the mid or late 1980s when district and other dual meet tournaments were established.

Junior varsity

Wrestling on the junior varsity team was a big deal during the formative years and thereafter. Even given Newport's small male enrollment, many weight classes were three or four wrestlers deep. Full squads were put on the mats for junior varsity matches before the varsity wrestled. The varsity would watch the beginning of the meets to cheer their teammates on before going to the locker room to prepare.

All junior varsity seasons during the formative years for which records have been found were successful. No results have been found for matches during the 1957-58 and 1959-60 seasons, but a complete run-down of the undefeated 1958-59 team was recorded in the News-Sun. The team went 12-0 and must have won the Section III league title if there was one. The junior varsity wrestlers won 114 individual bouts while losing only 28 and drawing 6. Seven of the 11 weight-class starters won at least ten matches and 19 wrestlers in all logged JV matches.

No league records have been found from 1960-61 through 1966-67 when Newport was in the Blue Mountain League, but overall records were as follows: 7-2-1 (1960-61); 12-1

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(1961-62); 9-1 (1962-63); 13-1 (1963-64); 12-2 (1964-65); and 13-1 (1965-66). From 1966-67 through 1971-72 the junior varsity won four Tri-Valley League titles with undefeated records of 7-0 (1966-67); 8-0 (1968-69); 7-0 (1970-71); and 6-0 (1971-72). Overall records during these years were 10-1-1 (1966-67); 8-5 (1967-68); 14-0 (1968-69); 9-5 (1969-70); 13-1 (1970-71); and 11-3 (1971-72).

The 1959-60 undefeated team was coached by famed Newport athlete Bob Rice. He was assistant coach only that one season before moving on to head coaching positions. Don Steinhart was assistant coach for four seasons from 1960-61 through 1963-64 before becoming a long-time assistant to Coach Craig at Cedar Cliff. James Reiley followed for two seasons and Joseph Walter and Charles Benjamin each for one. Dave Fuller was coach of the 1968-69 undefeated team in his only coaching season. Jeff Bilger took over in the 1969-70 season and was assistant coach through the 1974-75 season. All of these men were teachers at Newport - some of which may have been conscripted to their coaching positions.

Elementary and junior high intramural program

The elementary and junior high intramural program was important during the formative years of the program. As noted above, a seventh and eighth grade tournament was held at the end of the inaugural 1956-57 season. The 85-93 lb. weight class bracket that I have a copy of shows 16 competitors, with those not successful in the semi-finals wrestling for third place. The two finalists were future district champions - seventh grader Vance Miller and eighth grader Clyde Cressler.

By the mid-1960s practices were held each Saturday morning for fifth through eighth graders, with high school wrestlers and graduates then wrestling in college coming in regularly to provide instruction. Everyone looked forward to the season-ending tournament. The winners of that first season's tournament were not the only ones published in the local paper; the match results were often reported.

Eventually, teams were taken to the Harrisburg Novice Wrestling Tournament held at the Harrisburg YMCA over Thanksgiving weekend. Newport won the senior division of the first tournament it entered in 1963, where 16 schools were represented. Tourneys prior to that fourth annual one had been won by Cedar Cliff (twice) and Mechanicsburg. This started a tradition of Newport success in both the junior and senior divisions of the Novice Tournament through the mid-1970s. At least one other youth tournament was attended during the formative years - the first annual Burnham YMCA Boys Wrestling Tournament in Lewistown during December, 1970, where Newport crowned four champions.

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Coaches

The three coaches during the first 15 years of the varsity program all brought something very valuable to the table, as has every Newport coach since then. The success of the three coaches cannot be denied. Coach Craig's teams were 19-5 in his two seasons, with a 12-1 record in just the second varsity season along with the first league title and first two district champs. Coach Ken Whistler's teams were 63-5 in five seasons, including the undefeated 1962-63 season, five more league titles, seven district champs, three state finalists and a state champ. Coach Alan Kline's teams were 95-12-1 in eight seasons, with seven more league titles, another undefeated season in 1966-67, nine more district champs and another state finalist.

Coach Craig moved on in 1959 to establish an excellent program at Cedar Cliff, ending with a total coaching record of 513 wins, 131 losses and 9 ties over 41 seasons. Coach Whistler moved on in 1964 to success at the established Manheim Township program, ending his career with a record of 331 wins and 115 losses over 30 seasons. And Coach Kline retired from coaching in 1972, remaining at Newport until the end of his teaching career, although there is no doubt he could have moved onto a coaching position at another school if he had chosen to do so. They were all a testament to the following statement in each of the match-day programs after listing the former and present coaches: "We know they will continue to instruct the boys in the attitudes which will help them meet the problems of life as well as teach the skills necessary to entertain us at the matches."

Fans

The wrestling fan base at Newport was strong from the beginning, as it continues to be. The gym was almost always full for home matches and a good contingent could be counted on for away matches. Student spectator buses were taken to some away matches. Pep rallies were held during school for some important matches. Following a December 1962 meet with Cedar Cliff, in which extra seats were provided by placing chairs on risers at both ends of the Newport gym and some of the estimated 1,000 fans still had to stand, Coach Whistler stated his belief that Newport's "fans are probably the most sincere and loyal fans in the area. The backing given to us was tremendous and it should be known that all of us concerned with wrestling appreciate your interest in us. We will try to repay you by wrestling our best in each bout."

One faithful fan who was there almost from the beginning merits mention. Lee Campbell started attending matches in 1965 and is still doing so over 50 years later. He has had special interests from time to time - brother Darry and sons Bart and Bret - but has also showed up steadily in between and after those times. There have been many other devoted fans through the years, but Lee has shown both longevity and dependence.

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Score table helpers

The tradition of teachers manning the scoring table started from the get go. A News-Sun article during the second part of the 1962-63 season recognized three teachers as very important men in the wrestling picture at Newport: Mr. Tom Fitzpatrick (the score keeper at home and away meets), Mr. Earl Myers (the wall clock and score board operator at home meets), and Mr. Walter Cressler (the riding time keeper at home and away meets). The article observed that mistakes by any of these men could cost a wrestler his bout and that they are consulted by referees who became confused. The article noted Mr. Cressler had missed only one match in the last four years. This tradition continued with teachers Paul Kockenderfer, Dan Morningred, Jeff Bilger and Tom Berrich helping the program in this way. Mr. Bilger is still at it, now into his fifth decade of manning the scorebook.

Red socks

An odd tradition that captured the imagination of the Newport fan base in the early 1960s was the wearing of red socks. This oddity came to Newport at the time Ken Whistler was the coach as a good luck charm. And it seemed to work, what with a dual meet record of 63-5 in five seasons along with the team's first representatives at the state tournament, first state finalists, and first state champ. Coach Whistler took this tradition to Manheim Township after the 1963-64 season.

Some years ago when standing in line for state tickets I overheard a story about Coach Whistler's red socks. A fan of a Harrisburg area team relayed that at one meet when the Township team entered the gym to warm up, a group of the opposing team's fans stood up, hitched their pants and all had on red socks. Not sure which team with red sock fans won the dual meet; or whether Coach Whistler was amused or miffed.

When traveling to a match with my parents in the early 1960s my father realized he did not have his red socks on. This would not do for a score table person. He found a store open (perhaps Pomeroy's or E. J. Corvettes) and purchased red socks.

News coverage

The news coverage of the team was excellent during the first 15 years in both the News-Sun and the Harrisburg Patriot-News. The News-Sun had extensive articles on each dual meet and tournament, often with box scores. In some years the write-ups and box scores included coverage of the junior varsity meets, which many fans came to watch before the varsity took stage. The Patriot-News also had very good coverage of the Newport program, running features from time to time on some of its more successful competitors. The positive coverage of these papers continued through the next decades and continues to be good today. During his tenure

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Coach Kline was one of the go-to coaches for comment on issues by the Harrisburg press along with Cedar Cliff Coach Craig and Lower Dauphin Coach Cleon Cassell.

Rivalries

As in all sports, rivalries develop in wrestling. Newport's first rivalry was with Mechanicsburg, which the team wrestled each of the first 15 years except the first. Mechanicsburg won five of the 14 matches, but the losses were often by a one or two match swing (e.g. 18-22; 17-20; 23-24; 15-23; 19-27; and 24-30). Cedar Cliff also became a non-league rival, with Newport winning seven of 13 matches after their program was established for the 1959-60 season. Newport won the first three meetings, the third by a razor thin 22-21 score, but Cedar Cliff caught up, defeating the Buffaloes in four of the last five seasons from 1967-68 through 1971-72. This rivalry was made special by Coach Craig having started both programs. As some consolation, Newport excelled above these Harrisburg-area rivals regularly during the postseason.

Boilings Springs was an early Blue Mountain league rival that came back on the schedule in the 1970-71 season, but never defeated Newport; 29-19 was the closest score even when they were second in the league. Camp Hill was also high in the league in the early 1960s, but could not match the Buffaloes, with a closest score of 28-14. Big Spring became a rival later in Newport's time in the Blue Mountain league and stayed on the schedule after that. They inflicted the only Blue Mountain league blemish with a 21-21 tie in 1964-65, but never won. However, although Newport regularly defeated them by large margins, two meets left no room for error: Newport's 21-20 win in 1968-69 and 26-23 victory in 1969-70.

Lewistown (later part of Penn Highlands and now part of Mifflin County), Chief Logan (later part of Penn Highlands and then Indian Valley and now part of Mifflin County), and West Snyder (now part of Midd-West) became Newport's rivals when they joined the Tri-Valley league. The only losses, however, from the 1966-67 season through the 1971-72 season were to Lewistown in 1967-68 (16-23); Chief Logan in 1969-70 (18-28); and Penn Highlands, which was not a league meet, in 1971-72 (21-23).

The final rivalry during the formative years was with fellow Perry County team Susquenita - mostly due to proximity and local bragging rights. Newport victories were lopsided for the first few years after Susquenita started its varsity program in 1960-61, but the margins were less in 1963-64 (31-18) and 1964-65 (27-14) before widening again. But in 1969-70 Susquenita caught up with a vengeance inflicting a 28-18 defeat on the Buffaloes. The next year Newport regained its composure with a 28-15 win and followed that up with a large win in 1971-72 to reach a series record of 11 wins and only one loss against its down river rivals.

Some details of the match with Susquenita during the 1970-71 season merits mention. After the embarrassing loss to its Perry County rival the season before in Cove, the scene at

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home in 1971 was a doozy. The gym was filled to capacity, with an overflow of fans from both schools in the cafeteria watching on closed circuit television. Newport had gained a sufficient lead to win before the heavyweight match and chose to forfeit that match to the future Susquenita district champ. This was not appreciated by the Susquenita wrestler or his father, with the former running across the mat and the later jumping out of the stands towards the Newport bench. A bit of a melee ensued (punches were thrown) and it took some time to restore order. But that was not the end of it - an article in a local paper questioning some of the referee calls during the meet caused several letters to the editor and a defense (with even an apology of sorts) from the sports writer. There were fortunately no repercussions the next season, although the two teams did not schedule each other for meets from 1973-74 through 1977-78.

Part of wrestling's expansion

Newport was part of a great expansion in District 3 and statewide wrestling during the late 1950s and 1960s; and reflected the success that a small school could achieve in a sport where competition was based on equal weights. There were 17 District 3 schools with teams in 1955, but 28 by the time Newport had its first representatives at the 1958 district tournament. By the 1961 tournament there were 41 teams; by 1962, 50; by 1966, 67; and in 1971 and 1972, 86. There was only one division of competition and with only limited exceptions where some section runner-ups advanced to districts, a defeat in the post-season eliminated a wrestler from further competition. The apex of participating schools in District 3 appears to have been in 1975 when there were 96 teams (39 in the large school division and 57 in the small school division). The current number is 92, (with 58 in the large school division and 34 some in the small school division). Statewide, there were 161 schools with wrestling in 1956 and 200 by 1958. The number increased to 642 by 1971 (all one division), but is currently down to 472 (234 in the large school division and 238 in the small school division).