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Positive rough-housing

By **KATHRYN NELSON**, Star Tribune

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Lying stomach down around the green square mat, two dozen boys anxiously watch their teammates spar inside the ring. With each blast of the buzzer, they cover their ears and let out a loud yelp, then wait until the room quiets for the next match. ¶ Inside the ring, Coach Chandell Knox tells two boys wearing red and green anklets to keep pinning, pushing and tripping, even when their own shoulders are nearly pushed to the mat. Her booming voice is almost as loud as the scoreboard's buzzer.

Inside this small gymnasium is the Harvest Preparatory School wrestling team -- a collection of 50 boys and one girl ranging in age from 5 to 9.

The program, now in its second year, began as a way for students to learn discipline and self-control -- and safely burn off their excess energy, said the school's co-founder, Dr. Ella Mahmoud.

"We tried karate," Mahmoud said, "but they were hurting each other." Now teachers and parents are finding the athletes to be more courteous, controlled and confident, both inside and outside the ring.

Harvest Prep is an African-centered K-6 charter school in north Minneapolis. Three-fourths of the students are from low-income families, so the school pays most of the wrestling program costs.

Those include the coach's salary, transportation and meals after practice. Aside from attending practices and tournaments, the wrestlers are required to uphold a grade average of B or above.

The team has more than doubled since last year, Mahmoud said, and is attracting more fans among parents, friends and teachers.

"We have to keep bringing out chairs [at the meets]," she said.

Evelyn Doyle, who came to watch her son Franklin practice on a Tuesday night, said she rarely lets him play outside their home because "the crime is too high." Joining the wrestling team has enabled Franklin to interact with other children and parents in a safe environment, she said. Plus, he seems to really be enjoying it.

"When they get done wrestling, they just don't want to leave," she said after attempting to shoo Franklin toward the exit for several minutes.

Emily Hogg cheered for her son, Marquis Bell, during a match, occasionally getting out of her chair to clap with enthusiasm. Marquis, 6, is a bit smaller than his classmates, making other sports like basketball more difficult to participate in, she said. Wrestling seems to be a perfect fit.

A way to build confidence

Marquis seems like he takes wrestling very seriously. With his protective eyewear and black spandex suit, he certainly looks the part.

As he locked eyes with his opponent in his match, he kept his tongue pressed to one side of his cheek in concentration. The two locked arms, then legs.

At the end of the struggle, Marquis had lost, and he left the mat, head drooping, and sank into his mother's arms.

Despite the occasional disappointment, Hogg said wrestling has given her self-conscious son more confidence. She was "kinda nervous" about letting Marquis wrestle at such a young age, "but I'm glad I decided [to let him] do it," she said.

"I think I could see him continuing through the years," Hogg said.

Amidst all the yelling and cheering, Knox shows great tenderness with the children, high-fiving and sharing encouraging words each time a wrestler enters and exits the ring.

By the end of the night, Knox's voice was hoarse, but she was still smiling.

"I'm loving it," she said.

Mahmoud, who attends almost every practice and competition, has high hopes for the team as well.

"I believe we're going to have one of the largest teams in the state," she said.

Kathryn Nelson is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.

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