

WRESTLING



Photo for the Times: Lana Swenson  
Ripley Swenson comes from a wrestling family, as her father, Peter, and brother, Ryker wrestle.



Photo for the Times: Heidi Witt  
Lexi Gallagher opened enrolled from Brodhead to Monroe and gave wrestling a try.



Photo for the Times: Amanda Aird  
Kaylee Russell qualified for girls sectionals in Evansville, where she fell in the semifinals.

# Taking the mat by storm

## Female wrestling participation soars in Wisconsin, nationally

By Natalie Dillon  
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MONROE — Freshman Ripley Swenson has been around wrestling her whole life, but she'd never taken to the mat herself. At least not until this year.

Ripley had been the manager for her father, Peter, and brother, Ryker, at tournaments. The Sugar River wrestling coach thought his daughter would stay on as a manager in high school. Never did he envision her on the mat with his son and other Raider athletes.

"I'm trying to wrap my brain around it still, as to what motivated her to do wrestling," Peter said. "There was never a time I said, 'I want you to wrestle; I need you to wrestle.' But over the summer, she started asking questions about wrestling."

From that point on, Ripley's wrestling career began. Just 30 miles away, another female wrestler's story started.

### WHY WRESTLE SWEATY MEN?

Monroe junior Lexi Gallagher had no wrestling experience, but when head coach Tom Witt sent an email out asking for wrestlers, she thought she'd give it a try.

"I've tried basketball, softball and volleyball, but they just weren't my thing," Gallagher said. "I've had friends wrestle, and I've watched it for a couple years now. I thought what every girl thought, 'Why would you want to do that? Why would you want to roll around on mats with sweaty men?' But I wanted to try something new."

The first few weeks were full of frustration for Lexi, as she learned all the basic moves. In her first match against another female, she was pinned right away.

"Wrestling is a unique sport in, if you don't have any prior knowledge, you are going to struggle," Witt said. "Kids aren't in the backyard wrestling — they're out shooting baskets, hitting a wiffle ball or throwing a football. You don't get wrestling skills just by chance."

Gradually, through hard work,

Lexi improved. When she wrestled two more girls in Oregon, she beat them both. Her first win — ever — came by pinfall. She ended the season with a 4-16 record. The other two wins came as byes in a round-robin tournament in Jefferson.

Although Lexi was the only girl on Monroe's 2022-23 roster, she wasn't the first wrestler to come through the Cheesemaker program.

### SETTING THE PRECEDENT

The last female wrestler for Monroe was Terri Holmes, a 2015 graduate. She had wrestled all through Monroe's Mat Rat program and competed at the varsity level.

Sugar River, too, had female wrestlers in the past — Bri Sargent from New Glarus. In fact, sophomore Adalyn Danz-Grass has been wrestling since seventh grade.

"I was really rowdy as a kid," Adalyn said. "I was hyper, so my mom put me in there [wrestling] to be calm and less energetic. I kept with it when I got older. It seems fun and gives me a good way to get exercise."

Since Ripley joined wrestling this season, Adalyn has been a great support for Ripley. Being able to wrestle another female in practice put Ripley at ease.

"We are each other's practice partners, so if one of us isn't there, it's like, 'Oh no, who am I supposed to go with now?'" Ripley said.

Peter noticed the rapport his two female wrestlers developed during the season and how it translated to their performances on the mat.

"It's that peer-to-peer support," Peter said. "She [Ripley] is going out for something that is brand new, and it's an entirely different gender that's doing it. I think there's a comfort level, knowing they are doing that together. For Adalyn, she's been doing it for years without any other females. Now, I think Adalyn even had a year of more comfort with that sup-

port there."

### NUMBERS ON THE RISE

Lexi and Ripley are just two of the many female athletes to join wrestling in the 2022-23 season. According to the WIAA, 452 girls wrestled at WIAA member schools in the 2021-22 season. In 2022-23, 744 girls wrestled during the season, with 443 competing at sectionals and 192 qualifying for state.

This season was the second of female wrestling as a WIAA-sanctioned sport with a state tournament like the boys. Prior to 2018, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported just six states with female wrestling championships — Hawaii, Texas, Washington, California, Alaska and Tennessee. Twenty-five more states joined in 2018.

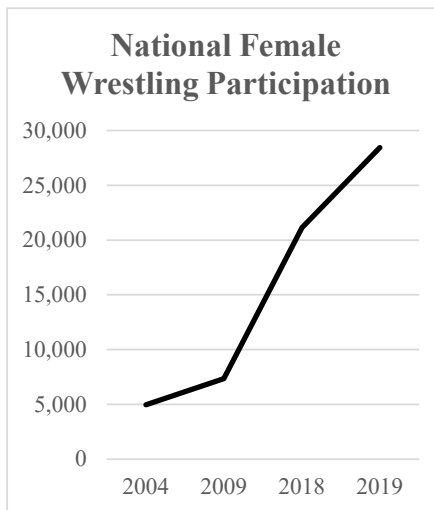
This season there were five local female high school wrestlers: Darlington-Black Hawk's Kaylee Russell, Parkview-Albany's Lexi Hanson, Monroe's Lexi Gallagher and Sugar River's Ripley Swenson and Adalyn Danz-Grass.

Kaylee (120 pounds) posted a 4-4 record in the girls division. She participated in the Division 2 sectional at Evansville on Saturday, Feb. 18, where she fell in the semifinals.

Lexi Hanson (107 pounds) posted a 5-3 record with two pinfalls. She competed at the WWCA Challenge Series and the 2023 WI Challenge Series. Like Kaylee, Lexi participated in the Division 2 sectional, falling in the semifinals.

Lexi Gallagher (120 pounds) went 4-16 in the boys division. Due to open enrollment rules, she was unable to compete in any girls-only tournaments. Against girls, though, she was 2-1 with two pinfalls.

Ripley (138 pounds) finished the season 6-5 with five pinfalls and one major decision, while teammate Adalyn (138/145 pounds) posted a 5-7 record with two pinfalls. Adalyn participated in the



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girls-only Badger State Invite, Bi-State and WI Challenge Series. She wrestled in the Division 2 sectional, falling in the semifinals.

### LOOKING FORWARD

Female wrestling is projected to keep growing, and Witt has seen that begin in the youth program. Monroe Wrestling Club currently boasts 11 female wrestlers.

"I'm pretty excited. We will have some girls come up from the middle school, which will expand the team," Lexi said. "I'm also excited to wrestle girls — it's more comfortable."

Witt has made changes for next year, anticipating the addition of another female high school wrestler — Althea Eckdahl. Not only will he be getting female-tailored singlets, but the girls will participate in three consecutive all-girls tournaments: Waunakee's Invite, Badger State and Bi-State's Girls Showcase.

"That's why I changed our schedule," Witt said. "So they could wrestle three tournaments in a row of just females."

Sugar River's female youth numbers have been on the rise lately, too.

"We've got some girls in the middle school who are wrestling now, too," Peter said. "Our high

school girls know there are other girls coming in, and our younger girls know that there are older girls doing it. It's a win-win scenario."

Ripley looks forward to the coming wrestling season, not only for more all-girls-tournaments, but also for future female teammates.

"I'm really excited," Ripley said. "At the all-girls tournaments, the environment is really nice. Everyone knows that it's a

guy-dominant sport, so we are so supportive of each other at tournaments. It makes it a lot more enjoyable. I'm excited for when there's more girls on the team, so there's more people you can relate to."

In fact, Peter intends to hire a female coach next season that will follow the girls to their tournaments. Not only will she provide wrestling knowledge, she will be able to relate with the female athletes better than Peter and his counterparts Dan Endres and Scott Fahey.

"We will have a female on the coaching staff who I think can hone in with the girls as they are practicing," Peter said. "Instead of splitting up all the coaches, we have a coach that would go with the girls to their tournaments then."

For the little girls — or high schoolers — wondering if they should join wrestling, Pete poses a question.

"As a teacher, I talk to my students about taking risks and opportunities. For these girls to do this is a risk, but there is a reward factor to everything. What's the harm of trying this and doing the best you can?" he said.

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— Ripley Swenson, Sugar River freshman

## OUTDOORS OVERVIEW

# Maple tree sweet for all seasons



Photos supplied

**ABOVE:** A fox squirrel licks a morning sap on a hybrid red/silver maple limb. **BELOW:** A stool seat shows wood scars where taps once allowed sap to escape and collect.



Right now maple sap is on our minds, and other times food, fuel, furniture, fire, shade, egg-container support, and batting average play into the picture.

Sap time? Watch the birds, squirrels, broken limbs, and the sun's sky. They'll all give us a signal, sometimes as directly as a fox squirrel licking a sap on the morning sun.

In Wisconsin, several maple tree species thrive and are there to greet spring with inconspicuous flowers of several sorts. Anthers and stigma-producing pollen and

seeds, then fruit, appear on some trees or parts of trees. Other flowers help out, too. They're getting ready to open; watch for them before the leaves. Squirrels find the edible.

Animals of all varieties know sugary sap water freezes into sapicles overnight. Deer and squirrels lick it, birds drink the sap. And kids and adults snap the icicle for a vanilla-like popsicle.

Bees and other insects are ready when the pollen and nectar appear, giving bees an important early source to take to colonies.

Fox squirrels and grays, likely flying types, too, visit at night. These buds, then flowers, and eventually seeds and developing helicopter-like fruits continue to feed animals. Even when the dry fruits fall, animals remove a single seed to tide them over until bigger nuts

become available.

All the while large, simple leaves, except those of boxelder, shade animals, keep the sun from light-starved understories, including maples' own offspring. Only the spring ephemeral flowers know enough to appear before the maple's shade dominates.

Who could forget the autumn foliage of sugar maples when the tree is finished manufacturing carbohydrates, fighting diseases, providing shelves for birds as small as ruby-throated hummingbirds, red robins, and a cardinal or two.

When the fluids no longer flow, and sooner, flooring, baseball bats, cabinetry, and furniture owe a debt to maples. If the sawyer waits several hundred years, firewood's ample. Spent sap-providing trees continue to "live" on as seats for stools, faces for clocks, and

bowls carefully turned, all show fine figure in the wood. An added feature developed from disrupted, darkened growth resulting from tapping miraculously healed by an everlasting meristem in the living tree.

One of these maples, the sugar, was selected as Wisconsin's state tree during a time when state symbols made sense as a flower (wood violet), wildlife animal (white-tailed deer) and game fish (muskie).

We owe the maple, even compound-leaved boxelders, silvers, reds and their hybrids, a debt of gratitude for being there from spring to following springs.

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