



# History of BC High School Wrestling

A comprehensive look at the History of Wrestling in BC.

# HISTORY OF BC HIGH SCHOOL WRESTLING



There is clear evidence of a diverse tradition of wrestling practiced by the First Nations people of Canada, in particular a form of leg wrestling within the Inuit culture and a more comprehensive folkstyle amongst the Chipewyans, a semi-nomadic people located in the northern half of our present-day prairie provinces. Interestingly the Chipewyans included hair-pulling as accepted technique, an action which is not permitted in most forms of the sport, nor today in Olympic freestyle wrestling. Not much else is known on the topic of First Nations' grappling, particularly in British Columbia, though like most indigenous cultures there were probably other, equally extensive types, of physical practice and partner contest that could be associated with modern-day wrestling.



In BC the first recorded formal wrestling matches took place during the Cariboo gold rush era of the early 1860s; these involved prize money for what appeared to be staged events for entertainment amongst Caucasian adventurers and gold-seekers in Barkerville, rather than serious competition. In the 1880s the St. Andrews and Caledonian Society (a Scottish-based social and educational organization) promoted contests held in four different styles: Scotch Backhold, Collar and Elbow, Catch-as-Catch-Can (an early form of freestyle wrestling) and Greco-Roman. These athletic wrestling competitions would soon be overwhelmed by "professional" events that attracted large crowds to the Opera houses of the growing cities of Vancouver, New Westminster, and Victoria. An early researcher intriguingly describes how wrestling became popular on the west coast of North America during the latter part of the nineteenth century, particularly in San Francisco. However, the author concludes that "it is not clear whether these people moved to the West Coast primarily to engage in wrestling, or if they had turned to performing after failing to find gold."



The inextricable combining of serious amateur competition with professional monied entertainment would continue right up until the 1950s. A classic example in BC of this personification of serious athletic endeavour with "rasslin' entertainment" would have been Niaz (Nick) Mohammed, an immigrant from the Indian sub-continent who initially found work as a welder in the shipyards of North Vancouver. Under the tutelage of ex-professional wrestler, George Bunka, Mohammed occasionally put on shows for money, but he also trained with the legendary Paul Nemeth (a Hungarian immigrant), who helped coach him in Olympic freestyle wrestling. Mohammed is noteworthy as he would become the first of several Indo-Canadian wrestlers from BC to represent Canada on the world stage, in his path-breaking case in 1952 at the Helsinki Olympic Games.



The Great Depression would see the founding of the Provincial Recreation ("Pro-Rec") phenomenon in British Columbia, with wrestling being promoted under its protective umbrella by the tireless Paul Nemeth. Established in 1934 under the direction of a Danish immigrant, Jan Eisenhardt, in order to promote a "dedicated commitment to physical health and activity as a means for securing social and personal freedom," Nemeth put on countless wrestling clinics around the province until Pro-Rec's demise in 1943. While continuing to work in a sawmill in Vancouver after World War II - he had previously worked in the early 1930s as a coal miner in Drumheller, Alberta - Nemeth continued to promote freestyle wrestling through a succession of clubs, then became Chair of the organizing committee for wrestling at the 1954 British Empire Games, held in Vancouver.

The economic long boom following the Second World War was crucially important as it permitted the financing of serious athletic programs in the province, particularly at the university level. Nemeth was hired at UBC in 1959 as its first wrestling coach - he would retire in 1973 - and would prove instrumental in promoting the sport in the burgeoning schools of Vancouver and its surrounding suburbs. He would sometimes put on twenty clinics a year in a diverse number of communities, including legendary sessions in his basement in Burnaby with high school coaches from other sports. Paul Nemeth was also BC

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Wrestling Association (BCWA) President from 1953-1971 (excluding 1957-58) and Canadian Amateur Wrestling Association (CAWA) President from 1969-1971. The championship team trophy for Boys at the BC High School Championship is thus logically named The Paul Nemeth Trophy. He would eventually link up with Art Miller from North Vancouver, an American immigrant and the owner-operator of a marine engine shop, who coached wrestling at the YMCA in downtown Vancouver. Miller would be instrumental in founding the wrestling referee's society in BC, his first recruit being a young Dave Higashi (and still looking young), who continues to this day to referee at the high school provincial championships. The Art Miller Trophy, awarded to the first-place Girls' team in BC, is named after this other pioneering wrestling coach and referee.

The overwhelming evidence of the origins of wrestling in British Columbia thus point to the blue-collar roots of the sport and its multi-ethnic immigrant spheres of influence. No one group can claim dominance in terms of the early development of wrestling in our province.



During the first six decades of the twentieth century, schools in British Columbia had championships in various sports, but these were only regional in scope and only went so far as the Island Championships (for Vancouver Island) or the Lower Mainland's Vancouver and District Championships. With the increase in population and rapid growth in school sport participation, particularly after World War II, changes were urgently required. As with the opening of a new university, SFU, the year 1965 also witnessed the founding of BC School Sports and the organization of the first province-wide high school wrestling championships, held at UBC in War Memorial Gym under the ever-watchful eye of Paul Nemeth. The first recipient of the Outstanding Wrestler (OW) award was Colin MacLeod from Burnaby Central. In 1966, the championships were hosted by his alma mater. For the first decades of its existence the high school championships moved from school to school in the Lower Mainland, before moving out of town for the first time in 1982 to Norkam Secondary in Kamloops. Wrestling in BC was now moving into the mainstream of an institutionalized setting - high schools and universities - while at the same time distancing itself from its mostly working-class roots. It would give the sport an opportunity to start building a not insignificant mass base of youth participation.



In the early years of high school wrestling, many of the pioneer coaches that took an interest in wrestling were high school football coaches. They had taken compulsory PE activity courses at university, including wrestling classes, which piqued their interest. Paul Nemeth - him again - was the instructor of these wrestling courses at UBC. Though not all of them had attended UBC, the dynamic for PE majors was virtually the same everywhere, in that they had to take activity classes delving into how to teach various sports. Football coaches of note in these early days were Earl Henderson, Don Mcritchie, Barry Callaghan, Mike Ross, Bill Vance, Jack Schrieber, and Bill Mitchell; they developed teams that essentially won all the wrestling championships up until 1978.



How did wrestling take root in the high schools? A story might illustrate the process that sometimes took place. Going backwards along the timeline a little, at the end of a two-week wrestling unit in a 1963 PE class at Burnaby Central, students watched a movie-documentary from Pennsylvania State University entitled "Ready, Wrestle!" Students Larry Kliparchuk, Chris Nemeth, Dave Heatherington, Bobby Watson, and others were enthused enough to declare that they wanted a wrestling team at their school. Recently hired PE teacher, Earl Henderson, promised them that eventuality if they could get a dozen of their classmates to commit to practices. They did, and history was made. A team at Central was declared. When Earl Henderson left soon afterwards to take on a PE job at newly opened Carson Graham Secondary in North Vancouver, colleague Don Mcritchie, took over. Burnaby Central then became the first wrestling team to dominate the sport by winning three of the first four championships in 1965, 1966, and 1968. Burnaby South broke up Central's championship run by winning in 1967. In 1968, Central's John Adams won the

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Outstanding Wrestler (OW) award and would later become a prominent coach himself in East Vancouver, at Britannia Secondary. Sadly, Central's Coach Mcritchie succumbed to leukemia in 1970. Today, the third place Boys championship trophy is named in his honour. Under Ron Frederick's leadership, Burnaby Central continued to be a prominent top ten team in the 1970s.



Simon Fraser University, as already mentioned also established in 1965, would soon have a top-notch wrestling program of its own. Demonstrating a certain thread of continuity in history, a few of the same core of enthusiastic Burnaby Central wrestlers, led by Larry Kliparchuk - now SFU students - tried to convince Lorne Davies, the university's Athletic Director, that wrestling should be part of the university's growing stable of sport programs. Undoubtedly influenced to a much greater degree by other positive features inherent to wrestling, Davies nonetheless appeared sympathetic, made a momentous decision, and SFU soon thereafter had a varsity team. Another personified historical thread that quickly emerged was that one of the rising stars up on the hill, Jim Miller, was one of Art Miller's four athletically gifted sons. Miller was a Delbrook Secondary grad from North Vancouver and had competed for Brown University in the Ivy League right after high school. Miller became a 1976 Olympian, SFU assistant coach, and future Canadian National Wrestling Head Coach himself (1980-1996). SFU would soon come to dominate the university wrestling scene in Canada, particularly under the direction of two hugely influential coaches recruited by Lorne Davies; these were Americans Jim Pond and especially Mike R. Jones, both from Oregon State University.



Over on the Island, Victoria's Ed Ashmore, originally a gymnastics specialist, also proved to be a very good wrestling coach. He taught at S.J. Willis Junior High School in Victoria. While not winning team championships, Ashmore was remarkably successful in producing several outstanding wrestlers through both his school facilities and the local YMCA. Several of his wrestlers would win individual provincial high school titles and would later go on to represent Canada internationally. In particular, Taras Hryb would distinguish himself as a two-time BC High School champion (1968 and 1969), and by being the only BC high school wrestler to go undefeated during the inaugural BC-Japan High School wrestling exchange in 1969 (7-0), then place third that same year at the World Junior Championships staged in Boulder, Colorado. He would subsequently be voted BC High School Athlete-of-the-Year for his accomplishments, the first-ever garnered by a wrestler. Amongst many other top-flight performances, the path-breaking Hryb would represent Canada at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. He would be joined at the higher levels of competition by fellow Victoria wrestling standouts produced by Ashmore that included brothers George and Mike Richey, Craig Delahunt, and Rolf Shetterer. Last but not least was the very impressive Clark Davis. In contrast to his Victoria training partners, and after extended stays along a wrestling itinerary that began at UBC and included Lakehead University (in Thunder Bay), he landed eventually on the other side of the country, at Concordia University in Montreal. He would compete there for Victor Zilberman, a brilliant and demanding Soviet-Israeli émigré coach. Gravitating up the international ladder of success, Davis began by being a silver medalist at the 1979 Pan-American Games, then finished a remarkable second at Senior Worlds in 1982 (90 kg) and 1985 (100 kg), was a two-time Commonwealth Games gold medallist (1982 and 1986), and finally a two-time Olympian, in 1984 (Los Angeles) and 1988 (Seoul).



New Westminister's wrestling dynasty started in 1970 with NWSS capping a landmark season by sweeping all high school, novice, and junior championships entered by the school. Barry Callaghan coached the Hyacks from 1968 until 1975, and New West placed in the top three every year, winning team titles in 1969, 1970, and 1974. An individual highlight took place in 1970 when New Westminister wrestler Mick Leclair became the first student from his school to win a national Championship, in his case at 143 lbs. The 1973 version of the BC High School Championships then witnessed Callaghan-coached Brad

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Caulfield capture his unprecedented fifth straight provincial title by winning the 168 lbs weight class. He would be the first student-athlete in the province to accomplish this impressive feat.

During the early 1970s another school perennially in the championship mix was Centennial Secondary in Coquitlam. Under the leadership of the well-organized and highly influential Bill Mitchell (a superb all-round athlete himself and a former CFL football player), Centennial would establish an exceptional wrestling program that featured a strong junior high school wrestling feeder system. Coach Mitchell's teams would win three consecutive team championships from 1971 to 1973 and placed Centennial in the top three until 1977. The Centaurs would win provincial titles again in 1981 and 1984. Bill Mitchell founded the initial BC-Japan wrestling cultural exchange program in 1969, was BC Wrestling President from 1970-1980, and was President of CAWA from 1984-1986. Coach Mitchell left behind a fabulous legacy as a coach, builder, and administrator in our sport.



In 1978, the BC Secondary Schools Wrestling Association (BCSSWA) changed its rules to alter the scoring system to award team points only to the top six finishers. The point-scoring system was changed to simplify the team point accumulations and reflect international freestyle rules. This was significant as it reflected the lessening of the previous high school scoring system that had been based on American folkstyle wrestling. High school wrestling in BC was now more oriented to the international stage, not so much in terms of developments south of the border.

In 1975 John Adams was hired at Britannia Secondary. The former Burnaby Central star would lead the Bruins to four consecutive team titles, from 1975 through to 1978, a record that would stand for 25 years. Prior to Coach Adams' arrival, "Brit" was consistently a top-five team. However, the school always fell a little short of winning the championship title. Adams had wrestled varsity for Western Washington University in Bellingham and provided the Bruins with the technical expertise to push them over the top. He was aided by long-time coach Bill Vance in his efforts, a veteran leader and wrestling aficionado in his own right. Adams and Vance would lead Britannia to two additional top three team placings before the former departed from the teaching profession and changed careers.



One of the highlights of the 1978 secondary schools' championship was the selection of Port Coquitlam's Chris Rinke as the tournament's Outstanding Wrestler (OW). This came after a thrilling 8-7 victory over Geordie Dean, from neighbouring Port Moody Secondary. As is often the case, the two former rivals would become good teammates at SFU the following year, Dean eventually going on to becoming a New Westminster Salmonbellies lacrosse star. In contrast, the athletic and super-competitive Rinke would go on to represent Canada at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles where he took home the bronze medal. Moreover, Rinke and his Ravens teammate, Steve Marshall, would represent Canada at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. Poco Secondary, now renamed Terry Fox Secondary, was led by the larger-than-life and ever-entertaining Mike Ross. He was the school's long-time football coach and remains the only high school teacher in Canada to have produced three team members in wrestling at one Olympiad. The third wrestler in the mix? Dan Payne, a heavyweight, who actually had to drop some weight in order to make the new weight limit of 130 kilos! Payne finished sixth in Seoul and would go on to have an eleven-year playing career as an offensive lineman in the CFL.



The year 1979 saw Windsor Secondary in North Vancouver play spoiler to the host school of the provincial tournament, Britannia Secondary. Led by Coach Sam Scorda and a surprising number of highly skilled athletes, Windsor nevertheless conceded the OW to Britannia's Wayne Chow, who capped an impressive tournament by capturing his third provincial title. Chow would go on to win a National championship title later on that

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spring, then was selected BC High School Athlete-of-the-Year in the fall – the second for a wrestler - for his scintillating performances.

Led by Bill Adair, both a National age-group judo and wrestling champion, Templeton won the overall team title in 1980. The remainder of the decade, however, began to see a shift of power away from the Lower Mainland. In the 1980s five teams outside the immediate Vancouver area won provincial titles, the north in particular revealing its ability to develop impressive wrestlers.



The year 1981 would see Centennial take its fourth provincial crown. The Centaurs were led by Rick Dove at 66 kg, who would cap one of the greatest seasons in BC high school wrestling history by completing an impressive 28-match undefeated winning streak, all of them ending by way of a pin. Just as impressive was that he was not scored upon throughout the season leading up to the championship tournament. Dove would go on to compete on the mat for the powerhouse SFU wrestling squad.

In 1982 Brian Dick hosted the high school championships for the first time outside the Lower Mainland, in the interior town of Kamloops. At that tournament, North Surrey Secondary won their first and only championship under the expert guidance of Mimmo Marrello. Marrello exemplified the small, but steady stream, of former varsity wrestlers from university that took up teaching positions and began to coach high school wrestling teams. The football coach phenomenon was slowly receding, to be replaced by specialists in the field. Of note in 1982 was that North Surrey only had four entries in the tournament, but three of the four proceeded to win their individual weight classes on the way to an unexpected team title. The Spartans' John Tenta took home the prestigious heavyweight crown that year; he would later go on to win the World Junior Wrestling Championship title, the first Canadian to ever accomplish this feat. A huge man, Tenta for several years would proceed to make a living in Japan as a professional Sumo wrestler, then reinvent himself as “the Earthquake” on the North American professional rasslin’ circuit.



The 1983 championship tournament was held outside the Lower Mainland for the second time. Prince George did an excellent job of hosting the event and it proved to be a very exciting finish. Under Tom McEvey’s exceptional leadership, Alberni District Secondary School (ADSS) became the first school outside the Vancouver area to win the provincial championship. Alberni’s John McDonald would win the OW, then go on to have a very successful varsity wrestling career at SFU. After graduation he returned to his hometown to lead the coaching staff at his alma mater and became a teacher and guidance counsellor. Centennial would storm back to take their fifth title in 1984, while Alberni would respond with the 1985 title. Coach McEvey went on to become a highly regarded school administrator and was instrumental in developing what has been described as a “coaching tree,” whereby every school in Alberni had access to a mat and a teacher-coach in wrestling. With a massive base, the Alberni model quickly became the example to emulate, with other Vancouver Island school districts attempting to follow suit. Campbell River, in particular, is constructing a similarly impressive developmental structure.



1985 would see a relatively unknown Tom Petryshen from Surrey’s Guildford Park come into the tournament unranked and walk away with the 38 kg title, the lightest weight-class in BC high school wrestling. Petryshen would go on to represent Canada at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona at 48 kg, also the lightest weight-class at the time in the Olympic wrestling event.

The latter part of the 1980s witnessed the appearance of relentless and highly skilled wrestlers from the northern town of Smithers and the nearby village of Kitwanga. Led by their fiercely passionate coach, Mike Richey, a UBC wrestling grad, Daryl Simpson and Craig Roberts almost led their team to an unlikely provincial high school title in 1986.

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But it was not to be, as the east side's Sir Charles Tupper Secondary, led by long-time coaches Jack Schriber and Hank Lyth (another Dane and a CAWA President), went on to take its first provincial title. Roberts, a 68-kg wrestler, would go on to wrestle varsity at SFU, then win a 1991 Commonwealth Games gold medal, a 1995 Pan American silver, and a spot on the 1996 Summer Olympic team in Atlanta.

Jack Schriber would retire from coaching in 1988. He is the only coach in history to have led three different schools to a provincial title. Coach Schriber – also a football coach - headed the 1972 John Oliver Jokers to a shared championship title with Centennial (the only tie in Boy's championship history), the 1980 Templeton Titans, and, as previously mentioned, the 1986 Sir Charles Tupper Tigers. Most notably he also coached three OW award winners – Rick Walmsley (JO - 1972), Bill Adair (Templeton – 1980), and Yogi Johl (Tupper - 1988). Johl, Tupper's perennially popular strong man, became a 1996 Atlanta Olympian at 130 kg.

In 1987 and 1988 Coach Brian Dick led Norkam Secondary to high school team titles, the first school from BC's interior to accomplish the feat. Over the next fifteen years Norkam would be a force to reckon with, placing several times in the top ten. A suave administrator, Brian took on many different roles on the Executive of the high school wrestling commission, in particular his role as Treasurer. He was a major influence in Kamloops and the Okanagan and hosted numerous BC Age Class tournaments that promoted regional and provincial development. Most notably, Brian helped produce Scott Bianco, a 1994 Commonwealth Games gold medallist and a 1996 Atlanta Olympian at 96 kg.

Closing off the decade, Robron Secondary in Campbell River, led by Coach Brett Lawrason, became the second Vancouver Island team to win the Boys championship team title. Lawrason, in a foreshadowing of what would happen more extensively later on, had been a wrestler in the 1970s under Barry Callaghan's demanding mentorship in New Westminster.

The 1990s opened the floodgates for the coming-of-age of several more second-generation coaches who issued out of programs run by pioneering individuals. As previously mentioned, several of these young coaches had wrestled at SFU under Mike Jones, the Burnaby university's head coach. Much admired, and deservedly so, Jones moulded numerous athletes that entered the field of education and became successful coaches in their own right at the high school level. During this decade the sport of wrestling became more organized, with popular annual coaching clinics taking place across the province. In addition, the BCWA (largely made up of high school coaches at the time), was being supported by the hard-working and dedicated Mary Anne DeCorby, the Executive Director of the Provincial Sports Organization (PSO). Another key development of this decade was the opening up of wrestling to the other half of the high school population: Girls.

The first few years of the 1990s saw Carson Graham Secondary from North Vancouver win the championship title on two occasions. In the process Barry Callaghan became only the second coach in history to do so while teaching at two different schools. In 1990 Carson Graham won their first title and Barry Callaghan completed his 25th and final year as a high school wrestling coach, having prowled the wrestling mats with his motivating presence (and voice!) at NWSS, Hamilton Junior Secondary (also in North Vancouver), and Carson Graham. He nevertheless remained in an advisory position in the background, always making himself available to the new coaches in order to share his perspectives garnered over long years of experience. His several trips to Japan with

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wrestling teams - and also having hosted teams from the land of the rising sun - proved particularly valuable to the next generation.

In 1991 Norkam Secondary had not quite finished their title run, and Coach Brian Dick led the Saints to their third title in five years.

Also that decade a young coach, Giulio Decotiis, one of Barry Callaghan's former athletes, led Carson Graham to team titles in 1992, 1993, and 1995. However, as with John Adams at Britannia years earlier, Decotiis' coaching career would be relatively brief as he left the school going to work instead alongside several of his brothers to build the real estate and construction giant, the ONNI corporation. For several years, ONNI has been a major supporter of the BC High School Championships.

In 1994 Maple Ridge Secondary, under Coach Bill McCrae, broke up Carson's three-peat by winning their first championship. McCrae, originally from Schumacher, Ontario, was another varsity wrestler recruited to SFU who went into teaching. The year 1994 was also significant as Alberni's Yorgo Romanis, a specialist in the two-on-one standing arm-control technique, became only the second wrestler to capture five provincial titles during his high school career.

The following year, 1995, became a watershed moment in the history of wrestling in the province of British Columbia. After five years of exhibition meets, a Girls championship tournament was finally given official recognition by BC School Sports. North Vancouver teacher Ian McDonald undertook most of the political legwork to make this happen, and he was aided in his efforts by fellow high school coaches Larry Kliparchuk, Joe Sullivan, Bill Adair, and Barry Best. For the first time ever a Girls Team champion would be recognized. Carson Graham took home this historic title and also won the Boys crown, making it a clean sweep for the North Van school. On the distaff side of the draw, Hazelton's Lyndsay Belisle was named the first-ever official OW. During her storied career she would go on to win a pair of silver medals at the Pan Am Games and Senior World championships. She was then one of the two female competitors in the world to officially step on the mat in 2004 in the first-ever match - including the famous Games of antiquity - in wrestling at an Olympic Games (in Athens). The trophy for the Girls OW is now named in her honour. Belisle was a pioneering female wrestler and put the village of Hazelton on the map, but she would not be the last.

High school wrestling history in BC would not be complete without mentioning in more detail the efforts of Ian McDonald, a strong guiding force on the North Shore. McDonald, yet another former SFU varsity wrestler, was a long-time teacher at Balmoral Junior Secondary and many of the great Carson Graham teams that were produced originated at his feeder school. As a builder of the sport, McDonald proved to be key in developing athletes, particularly female wrestlers such as Shannon Samler, Emily Richardson, and Ashley McKilligan, who would go on to compete for SFU and represent Canada internationally. Demonstrating a certain thread of continuity in history yet again, Coach McDonald's eldest son, Patrick (a BC champion in 2005), would become the first-ever second-generation wrestler at SFU. Ten years later, Ciara McCrae, the daughter of Bill McCrae (coincidentally a training partner to Ian McDonald), would be up on the hill as well. A four-time BC champion, Ciara, and her father, Bill, would be the first-ever father-daughter combination to separately learn the same eternal lessons on the venerated SFU wrestling mats.

It should be pointed out that Girls participation in wrestling during the 1990s was in its infancy, and that BCSS was the first high school organization in Canada to officially approve female participation. Our participation numbers then remained the highest in the country for quite some time, and, combined with the growing expertise of coaches in the school ranks, helps to explain our women's historically outstanding national and international results.

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In 1998, guided by an American originally from Oklahoma, Coach Joe Sullivan, the village of Hazelton (adjacent New Hazelton to be exact!) produced yet another outstanding female wrestler. Carol Huyhn would win a provincial championship title that year, get recruited to SFU, then famously go on to capture a gold medal in 2004 at the Beijing Olympic Games. It was one of the proudest moments for everyone involved in wrestling in BC, vindication for all the hard work collectively undertaken by countless volunteers to coach high school teams and put on tournaments. Carol Huyhn would then win gold at the Commonwealth Games, garner five World Championship medals during her illustrious career, then win bronze at the 2012 London Olympics. Wow!



In the latter part of the 1990s there is no doubt that Port Alberni was able to establish a certain dominance in the sport, particularly in the Boys division. Led by Head Coach, John McDonald, the Armada would, in fact, win three consecutive Boys team titles from 1996 to 1998. McDonald, an ADSS grad himself, had been a former star as an SFU varsity wrestler; his 1998 high school team, in particular, would dominate the mats by scoring a record 123 points. In the following six years the Armada would be highly competitive, consistently placing in the top three. With the combination of John McDonald's on-mat coaching expertise and Tom McEvay's visionary leadership, Alberni produced many outstanding athletes, none more so than Travis Cross, a Canadian Olympian, who competed in Beijing at 84 kg in 2008.

From 1995 to 2004 the Girls championship title changed hands several times, with a seesaw battle going back and forth between schools from the Lower Mainland and schools from Vancouver Island. The following teams traded the Girls championship title: Carson Graham (1995, 2004), Phoenix Middle School from Campbell River (1996), Centennial in Coquitlam (1997, 2001), Alberni (1998, 2000), and Carihi, also in Campbell River (1999, 2002, 2003).



From 2006 to 2012, the North Shore dominated the female division. The combination of Balmoral and Carson Graham turned out to be a powerful force. During this time frame Carson captured five Girls championships for a total of seven; they are still the frontrunners in this regard. Balmoral, a junior high, won their only title in 2007. The North Shore juggernaut would not be derailed until 2013 when Alberni – and later Saint Thomas More (in Burnaby) – would finally break the winning streak.

In 2011 Carson's chance to win five in-a-row was derailed by the pride of the North, Smithers Secondary. Long-time coach, Mike Richey, could finally lay claim to a championship team title. It was well deserved. The North (actually the geographic centre of BC – but certainly north of Vancouver), had produced many great teams and outstanding individual high school wrestlers. Under the leadership of Don Roy, Joe Sullivan, Jim Mitchell, and Mike Richey, it was certainly time for one of the massive region's several wrestling schools to be recognized.



Starting in 1999 and through to the end of the first decade in the second millennial, Burnaby Central resurfaced as a force to be reckoned with once again in BC High School wrestling. Led by a brilliant technician and tactical coach, Gianni Buono, Burnaby Central would dominate the Boys championship like never before. Aided by Assistant Coaches Ron Frederick and Nima Banihashemi, the Wildcats restarted their winning ways by narrowly upsetting the very talented Yale Lions from Abbotsford, (111-105); this was their first team championship in thirty-one years. The next four years would see Burnaby Central dominate the Boys championship title by winning by over fifty points each year. The team would then average 130 points in team scoring over the next half-decade, setting the record for most consecutive Boys team titles, with five. The new team title record eclipsed Buono's alma mater, the Britannia Bruins, led by coaches Adams and Vance. Moreover, the Wildcats won eight provincial Boys titles over twelve years (1999-2003, 2005, 2009-2010)

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and established the team title point record in the Boys division at 153 (2001) and 138 (2003), breaking the previous Alberni record. To this day the Burnaby Central Wildcats hold the record for the most high school provincial Boys team titles in BC with eleven. Gianni Buono, a former SFU star in his own right, thus became the winningest wrestling coach in BC high school history. Having recently retired from coaching, he rightfully deserves every accolade sent his way.

During this decade, Burnaby Central produced numerous individual provincial and national champions. However, two athletes have stood above the rest: Roozbeh Banihashemi and Amar Dhesi. Banihashemi, an 84 kg wrestler, was BC High School athlete-of-the-year in the year 2000, went on to represent Canada for several years on the senior national team, and is one of only a handful of Canadian male athletes to win a Pan American Games gold medal in wrestling; it should be understood that the world-class American and Cuban entries are massive obstacles to any Canadian winning their weight class at this tournament. Heavyweight Amar Dhesi, in turn, became in 2014 only the second male wrestler from BC to win a Junior World Championship title. He then captured third place in 2018 at the NCAA championship for Oregon State University, and was a 2020 Olympian in Tokyo at the new heavyweight limit of 125 kg.



In 2004 and 2006 Rick Hansen Secondary narrowly edged out Burnaby Central in the Boys division to prevent Burnaby Central from winning eight consecutive team titles. It was becoming apparent that the year-long training regime undertaken by several Indo-Canadian clubs was increasingly a strong influence in both Surrey and Abbotsford. This relatively new phenomenon was now beginning to have a significant impact in changing the power base of high school wrestling in BC, particularly on the Boys side of the draw.



At this point, the life of Paul Nemeth interestingly intersects the timeline of wrestling in BC one more time. Now in his early 90s, he reappeared at the BC High School Championships in 1999 in Abbotsford. Pushed onto a mat in his wheelchair by his eldest son, Ed, he was introduced to the crowd prior to the Finals, was given a standing ovation, and promptly clambered out of his chair to perform ten push-ups. Unbeknownst to many in the crowd that afternoon is that the elderly man would pass away four years later, in 2003, a financially well-off man. Like any good wrestler during a match he had seized an opportunity when it presented itself, in this case a business opportunity; Nemeth had quietly secured the Canadian distribution rights to sell Asics Tiger sport shoes in the 1960s. After finishing his coaching and teaching stint at UBC in 1973, he had then ventured out into the business world, selling running shoes and wrestling boots. His business acumen would prove remarkably prescient, and many a high school wrestler in the Lower Mainland bought their first pair of boots out of the back of his station wagon, or at his store on Kingsway in Burnaby. More importantly, Nemeth later in life would set up a scholarship fund in his name for SFU wrestling that helped support the talented Daniel Igali. One of the genuine superstars in the history of SFU wrestling (he had a perfect 116-0 win/loss record), the Nigerian-born Igali would represent Canada at 69 kg during the Sydney Olympic Games in the year 2000 and win the gold medal, a giant first for our country. Paul Nemeth had already proven himself a visionary in many ways; but even in old age he had an eye for talent and was prepared to do the right thing. He would also underwrite the construction costs of a school in Eniwari, Nigeria, Igali's poverty-stricken home village. Literally had the past in wrestling contributed mightily to the present. Significantly, Nemeth had also managed in his lifetime to distance himself from his younger days; he was a long way off from repetitively mucking with a shovel in a coal mine, or heaving freshly-cut lumber off a sawmill's ever-moving green chain.



Back to the high school scene. In 2001 indigenous heavyweight wrestler, Kaitlynn Charlie, from Esquimalt Secondary School became the first female wrestler to win BC High School Athlete-of-the-Year. She would be followed by Stacie Anaka in 2005 from nearby Reynolds

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Secondary in Victoria. Anaka, also indigenous, would go on to win a bronze medal at the World University Games, then finish second at the Senior World Championships, both in 2013. On the Boys side of the draw, in 2003 and 2004 Arjun Bhullar was a two-time BC high school champion representing McRoberts Secondary in Richmond. He would go on to win multiple individual titles for SFU in both the CIS and the NAIA, was a 2007 bronze medallist at the Pan Am Games, a gold medallist at the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and a 2012 Olympian in London, England.



In the meantime, Manjot Sandhu from Surrey's Lord Tweedsmuir Secondary, had been voted BC High School Male Athlete-of-the-Year in 2007. The point here might be that high school wrestling in our province has produced some very good athletes indeed. The sport was finally getting the recognition it deserved.

In 2007 and 2008, Guildford Park Secondary in Surrey, under the coaching leadership of firefighter Mark Macrae, would be champions in the Boys category. His alma mater would prove to be a formidable team, dominating for a few seasons and producing an array of quality athletes. The Sabres victory in the Boys category blocked Carson Graham's drive to secure a clean sweep of the team titles, as the North Vancouver school would win the Girls and the inaugural Aggregate award. If the 2008 tournament hadn't provided enough history already, Harvie Sahota, from Abbotsford's Rick Hansen Secondary, did. Due to a quirk in the regulations that briefly permitted Grade 7 students to participate, the 60 kg wrestler became the only wrestler ever to win six consecutive BC High School Wrestling Championships (and the third to win five). That loophole has since been closed, so Sahota will likely remain the only athlete ever to accomplish this impressive feat.



Guildford Park would take home the Aggregate in 2009, and would feature lightning quick Isaac Bernard win his second individual title; Bernard would eventually become the fourth wrestler in history to win five consecutive times at the BC High School championships. That same year, 2009, a noticeably tall and extremely athletic Grade 11 Girl from Port Moody Secondary would take the 69 kg category. Coached by the highly respected Selwyn Tam and of Cree lineage, Justina Distasio would wrestle at SFU and eventually become a serious contender on the world stage. In 2015 she won a silver medal at the Pan Am Games, in 2017 she was third at the World Championships, and in 2018 she was atop the podium, becoming a Senior World champion at 72 kg. In the high schools, meanwhile, Port Alberni in 2010 would take the first of four Aggregate team titles in succession. The Armada, however, would share the Aggregate with an upwardly surging St. Thomas More (STM) in 2013. Meanwhile, in the Boys division, Abbotsford schools would dominate the team race, Rick Hansen winning it twice (2010-2011), followed by W.J. Mouat (2013), and Abby Traditional (2015).



During this time period Jim Mitchell, a long-time coach who had moved south from Hazelton to teach at W.J. Mouat Secondary in Abbotsford, became an Olympic official (London, 2008) and tournament host for multiple large-scale tournaments. His teams at Mouat were also very successful, Mouat sharing the Girls championship title with Carson in 2010 and winning the Boys team title again in 2013. Coach Mitchell is considered one of the special people in BC high school wrestling circles as his work ethic is legendary, and the amount of time he has given to the sport is staggering. He has been the BC High School Wrestling President, a BCWA Executive Board member, an on-mat official, a University of the Fraser Valley wrestling director, and tournament Chair for multiple Provincial and National Championships. Quite simply, he is one of those unsung heroes who makes things work! He has gathered around him an extraordinarily talented group of volunteers, including Ron Sweeney, Bruce Nicholson, and Stan Pedersen. Recently retired from teaching, Jim Mitchell continues to be heavily involved in the organization of the secondary schools championship.



## HISTORY OF BC HIGH SCHOOL WRESTLING



In 2014 St. Thomas More in Burnaby became the first school in history to take home all three team titles at the provincial championships. The Burnaby school would go on to win four more aggregate titles (for a total of five), mostly on the strength of its massive Girls program. From 2015 to 2019 the Girls from STM would go on to win a record four consecutive Girls titles. During this time frame no school was even remotely close to achieving the school's level of female participation, and it was all the more impressive due to the fact that STM's total school enrollment hovered around the relatively low total of 600 students. It is worth noting that STM had thus become the first independent school to win a provincial team title in wrestling. It is the only one so far.

New Westminster was reawakened from a long slumber by Coach Gord Sturrock in both 2016 and 2017. A superb technical coach, Sturrock led the Hyacks to their fourth and fifth team Boys titles in history. It should be noted that Professor Sturrock has a Ph.D., teaches at Douglas College, and has been instrumental in delivering and forming the coaching credentials of many aspiring coaches in our province. He is an integral part of the modern-day wrestling landscape.

In 2018 John McDonald would lead Alberni to become the second team to win all three titles. In doing so, ADSS would capture its sixth Boys team title, and was now in second place overall in historical team standings in that regard. McDonald was aided in this impressive championship achievement by James Messenger, Travis Cross, and a whole slew of the usual ADSS wrestling support personnel, arguably the most supportive high school wrestling people in the province. Tom McEvay could be justifiably proud of his Armada crew. ADSS would then win the Girls and Aggregate team titles in 2019, but would be prevented by Surrey's Tamanawis Secondary from winning the Boys title.

In 2020, the last year in which the high school championships have taken place, would see Maple Ridge Secondary take the Aggregate and the Girls title; Tamanawis would take the Boys title for the second year in a row. Individually, Cowichan Secondary's Talon Hird would win his fifth individual title, thus also becoming the fifth athlete to do so. He was offered a wrestling scholarship by the University of Alberta, and so it is in the basement entrails of the Butterdome in Edmonton that the diminutive Hird now spars on a regular basis with his new teammates. Originally from Thunder Bay (and having wrestled varsity at Lakehead University), Nick Zuback, his high school coach, will be tracking his protégé's achievements from afar.

The 2021 high school championships in BC were cancelled due to the world-wide coronavirus pandemic. Taking a year off has not been kind to high school wrestling in BC as the number of participants is down. Yet every cloud has a silver lining; 2021 was the year that Ana Godinez, formerly of Earl Marriott Secondary in White Rock (and initially coached by Tom Willman), became World U23 champion at 62 kg. Arriving in Canada as an immigrant child from Mexico with her parents in economically difficult circumstances, Godinez might best symbolize how newly arrived groups from other countries sometimes make the keenest, most talented wrestlers, or, at the very least, their first generation off-spring certainly do. Needless to say, this is not an entirely unfamiliar sports-related phenomenon.

We are now in the present, in 2022, in a new venue for the high school championships at the Pacific Coliseum, back to our traditional weekend of competition the last weekend of February. The wrestling community in British Columbia looks forward to the event. It should be exciting; the old timers always know that it will be. Good luck to all participants!

**\*\*\*This historical overview was meant to summarize and highlight specific aspects of BC High School wrestling, but is in no way a complete history. Contributors to this history include the following: Mark Brkic, Gianni Buono, Barry Callaghan, Tom McEvay, Larry Kliparchuk, and Ian McDonald.**

# History of the Tournament

YEAR	PRESIDENT	TOURNAMENT DIRECTOR	HOST SCHOOL	BOYS CHAMPIONS	GIRLS CHAMPIONS	AGGREGATE CHAMPIONS
1965		Paul Nemeth	UBC	Burnaby Central		
1966			Burnaby Central	Burnaby Central		
1967		Don Steen	Burnaby South	Burnaby South		
1968		Paul Nemeth	UBC	Burnaby Central		
1969		Paul Nemeth	UBC	New Westminster		
1970		Bill Collings	Winston Churchill	New Westminster		
1971		Bill Collings	Winston Churchill	Centennial		
1972	Barry Callaghan	Barry Callaghan	New Westminster	Centennial/John Oliver		
1973	Bill Mitchell	Bill Mitchell	Gladstone	Centennial		
1974		Bob Ash	Port Moody	New Westminster		
1975		Bob Ash	Port Moody	Britannia		
1976		Cann Christianson	Killamey	Britannia		
1977	Ray Munsie	Dave Newland	New West	Britannia		
1978	Ray Munsie	Bob Ash	Port Moody	Britannia		
1979	Ray Munsie	Bill Vance/John Adams	Britannia	Windsor		
1980	John Simpson	Earl Henderson	Carson Graham	Templeton		
1981	John Simpson	Bill Vance/John Adams	Britannia	Centennial		
1982	Barry Callaghan	Brian Dick	North Kamloops	North Surrey		
1983	Jack Cairney	Gary Wildfong	Prince George	Alberni District		
1984	Tom McEvay	Barry Callaghan/Earl Henderson	Carson Graham	Centennial		
1985	Tom McEvay	Tom McEvay	Alberni District	Alberni District		
1986	Jake Huizinga	John Simpson	Port Moody	Tupper		
1987	Jake Huizinga	Brian Dick	North Kamloops	North Kamloops		
1988	Brian Dick	Brett Lawrason	Campbell River	North Kamloops		
1989	Brian Dick	Rod Wadkins	Killamey	Robron		
1990	Brian Dick	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Carson Graham		
1991	Brian Dick	Don Chamberlain	Prince George	North Kamloops		
1992	Gianni Buono	Barry Callaghan/Earl Henderson	Carson Graham	Carson Graham		
1993	Gianni Buono	Mike Jones	Simon Fraser	Carson Graham		
1994	Jim Mitchell	Ed Ashmore	Claremont	Maple Ridge		
1995	Jim Mitchell	Larry Kliparchuk	Thomas Haney	Carson Graham	Carson Graham	
1996	Jim Mitchell	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Alberni District	Phoenix	
1997	Jim Mitchell	Hank Lyth	Sir Charles Tupper	Alberni District	Centennial	
1998	Jim Mitchell	Tom McEvay/Darral Clark	Alberni District	Alberni District	Alberni District	
1999	Jim Mitchell	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Burnaby Central	Carihi	
2000	Jim Mitchell	Chris Willoughby	Queen Elizabeth	Burnaby Central	Alberni District	
2001	Jim Mitchell	Chris Willoughby	Queen Elizabeth	Burnaby Central	Centennial	
2002	Jim Mitchell	Tom McEvay/Darral Clark	Alberni District	Burnaby Central	Carihi	
2003	Phil Cizmic	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Burnaby Central	Carihi	
2004	Phil Cizmic	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Rick Hansen	Carson Graham	
2005	Phil Cizmic	Bill Adair/Todd Smith	Pinetree	Burnaby Central	South Kamloops	

# History of the Tournament

YEAR	PRESIDENT	TOURNAMENT DIRECTOR	HOST SCHOOL	BOYS CHAMPIONS	GIRLS CHAMPIONS	AGGREGATE CHAMPIONS
2006	Phil Cizmic	Coralee Roy	Prince George	Rick Hansen	Carson Graham	
2007	Phil Cizmic	Chris Szostak	Guilford Park	Guilford Park	Balmoral	
2008	Phil Cizmic	Tom McEvay/Darral Clark	Alberni District	Guilford Park	Carson Graham	Carson Graham
2009	Phil Cizmic	Phil Cizmic	Simon Fraser	Burnaby Central	Carson Graham	Guildford Park
2010	Phil Cizmic	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Burnaby Central	W.J. Mouat/ Carson Graham	Alberni District
2011	Phil Cizmic	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Rick Hansen	Smithers	Alberni District
2012	Phil Cizmic	Tony Ramsey	Penticton	Rick Hansen	Carson Graham	Alberni District
2013	Phil Cizmic	Nick Zuback	Cowichan	W.J. Mouat	Alberni District	Alberni District/ St. Thomas More Collegiate
2014	Phil Cizmic	Louie Van Grootel	Prince George	St. Thomas More Collegiate	St. Thomas More Collegiate	St. Thomas More Collegiate
2015	Phil Cizmic	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	Abbotsford Traditional	St. Thomas More Collegiate	St. Thomas More Collegiate
2016	Ian MacDonald	Jim Mitchell	Abbotsford	New Westminster	St. Thomas More Collegiate	St. Thomas More Collegiate
2017	Ian MacDonald	Ray Munsie	Salmon Arm	New Westminster	St. Thomas More Collegiate	St. Thomas More Collegiate
2018	Mike Roselli	Tom McEvay/James Messenger	Alberni District	Alberni District	Alberni District	Alberni District
2019	Mike Roselli	Bruce Nicholson	Langley Events Centre	Tamanawis	Maple Ridge	Alberni District
2020	Mike Roselli	Bruce Nicholson	Langley Events Centre	Tamanawis	Maple Ridge	Maple Ridge

## TOURNAMENT RECORDS

### Most Times as Tournament Host

LOCATION	WINS
Abbotsford	10
Alberni District	5
Prince George	4
Port Moody	4
Carson Graham	3
UBC	3

### Most Boys Team Championships

SCHOOL	WINS
Burnaby Central	10
Alberni District	5
Centennial	4
Carson Graham	4
Britannia	3
Rick Hansen	3
New Westminster	3

### Most Girls Team Championships

SCHOOL	WINS
Carson Graham	7
Alberni District	4
St. Thomas More Collegiate	4
Carihi	3
Centennial	2
Maple Ridge	2

### Most Aggregate Team Championships

SCHOOL	WINS
Alberni District	6
St. Thomas More Collegiate	5
Carson Graham	1
Guildford Park	1