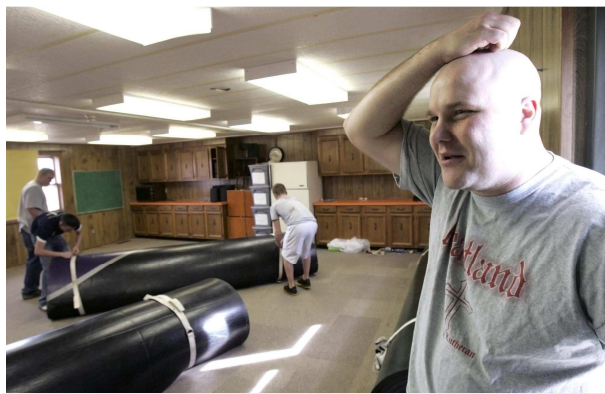


HLHS coach leads wrestling team from inception to victory



Heartland Lutheran wrestling coach Allen Blake (right) talks about starting a wrestling team at the school two years ago as the three members of his wrestling team (from left) Kyle Dibbern, Brad Einspahr and Jacob Schwan roll up the mats to prepare for construction on their wrestling area. What was a makeshift room in a modular classroom will be getting a new look.

Independent/Barrett Stinson



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Heartland Lutheran High School's wrestling mat sits in a wood-paneled modular classroom, with cabinets on one end and an exposed pipe to a drinking fountain on the other.

The setting certainly isn't ideal, say coach Allen Blake and his three-member team, but it gets the job done.

"That's just what it's all about," Blake adds. "Being able to get the job done."

In his two years as the school's wrestling coach, Blake has done quite a bit more than that.

He's taken a new program — the one he begged administrators to be able to start — to the state tournament, where two of its wrestlers won matches and one earned the school's first medal.

He's given the program schoolwide respectability and set a solid foundation for its future, and he's done it all in that tiny paneled room on essentially a volunteer basis.

"He's really the guiding force behind it," said John Weber, the school's principal, of the program's success. "He's the one that has really gotten those boys excited about it and instilled them with a proper sense of pride."

For Blake, 29, it all comes down to a love of wrestling. He began as a kindergartner in Arapahoe, and at some point, the sport got in his blood. As soon as he graduated from high school, he was helping coach Arapahoe's high school and youth programs.

When he and his wife, Jennifer, moved to Grand Island, he continually pestered former administrator Curt Fischer to let him start a wrestling team at Heartland Lutheran, where Jennifer teaches English, speech and drama.

After two years of running a co-op with Central Catholic, Blake's wish was granted.

He had been an insurance salesman, but he took a job as the assistant manager of the Super Saver bakery — even turning down a manager position at another company because the schedule wouldn't allow him to coach.

He drove down to Oxford with a borrowed truck and trailer to pick up a used wrestling mat he had wrestled on during high school.

He recruited two boys, giving him a grand total of four to launch the program.

And for the past two years, he and assistant coach Keith Harders have spent every winter afternoon after work in that classroom and every weekend at a meet.

Why put in so much work? It certainly wasn't for the money. As a head coach, Blake is required by the Nebraska Scholastic Activities Association to be paid, but he said he'd do it for free. He gives all of his pay back to the program for lodging, supplies or singlets.

Actually, Blake said, he's just compelled to teach one of the purest high school sports there is: two competitors, one match, one winner.

"If you lose, it's your fault. You can't blame it on a teammate," Blake said. "If you win, it's because you wrestled well. I just really like that aspect of it."

Blake has been dedicated to passing on that personal responsibility to his team. Wherever they've gone, Heartland Lutheran's wrestlers have been noted for winning and losing with integrity.

"He really expects his boys to live up to the best of their God-given talent," said Joan Schwan, whose son, Jacob, has wrestled for Blake for three years. "I think that self-control he teaches the boys, he shows it in real life."

The team's wrestlers are Blake's best recruiters. Of course, it's pretty easy when you're selling a little bit more than a spot on a team.

"With these three, it's not so much like a team as a brotherhood," Blake said. "These guys wrestle with a lot of heart and a lot of guts."

That work paid off most clearly last weekend, when Jacob Schwan, a junior, earned sixth place at 135 pounds and Kyle Dibbern, a senior, won a match at 215.

The team earned quite a bit of respect, both among other teams and back at basketball-crazy Heartland Lutheran.

"They really wanted to get there and try to make a name for the school and say, 'Hey, we're small but mighty,'" Blake said.

Consider that statement made.