

Instead Of Wrestling A Girl, High Schooler Chooses To Forfeit State Wrestling Match

March 10, 2019 SCOTT SIMON



When high school senior and wrestler Brendan Johnston realized he had to face Jaslynn Gallegos, a high school senior, and Angel Rios, a high school junior, in last month's Colorado state wrestling championship, he knew his shot at a state title was over.

Johnston refused to compete against Rios and Gallegos because they are both girls.

Gallegos went on to place fifth in that tournament, and Rios was fourth — marking the first time girls have placed at a Colorado state wrestling

tournament.

Despite her success, Gallegos finds it frustrating when she is treated differently as an athlete because of her gender. Her would-be opponent, Johnston, told reporters that he was uncomfortable wrestling females, in part because of his Christian beliefs.

"I'm not really comfortable with a couple of things with wrestling a girl," Johnston told *The Denver Post*. "The physical contact, there's a lot of it in wrestling. And I guess the physical aggression too. I don't want to treat a young lady like that on the mat. Or off the mat. And not to disrespect the heart or the effort that she's put in. That's not what I want to do either."

But while Gallegos said she respected his decision, she doesn't understand it.

"I just want to be a wrestler, not necessarily defined as a girl wrestler, so it kind of hurt me a little bit," she told NPR's Scott Simon. "I just want to be this wrestler, and my gender is holding me back."

A senior at Skyview High School in Thornton, Colo., Gallegos plans to continue the sport in college, where she will be competing against other women.

But wrestling someone of either gender doesn't faze Gallegos. She has been wrestling girls, and boys, since she was 5 years old.

"When I wrestle, it's literally all muscle memory, because I practice my shots, and my stand-ups, and my sit-outs, and my pinning combinations so often, I don't even have to think when I wrestle," she said.

She joins an increasing number of girls who are participating in the sport. Since 1994, the number of female high school wrestlers has grown from 804 to 16,562, according to the National Wrestling Coaches Association. But only 12 states have approved girls wrestling programs with sanctioned state championships, according to the association.

Colorado may soon join those ranks. In February 2018, the Colorado High School Activities Association approved girls wrestling for pilot seasons, which is the first step toward officially sanctioning the sport within the state.

Since girls wrestling is not a sanctioned sport in Colorado, girls have the right to participate alongside boys at the state tournament. This year was the first time for the state's pilot program, which allowed for a female state wrestling bracket. But Gallegos decided she wanted to compete with the boys.

When Gallegos steps up to the mat, her eyes are trained on her opponent. The minute the referee blows the whistle, she keeps her elbows in and moves quickly to ensnare her opponent, then wrangle her competitor down onto the mat.

The wrestling matches are a tangle of limbs — Gallegos' and her opponent's — arms and legs slipping out of holds or locking the other's in place. In the twisting and pushing, eventually one wrestler comes out on top; the victor grinds the opponent's face down against the mat, keeping tight control of a writhing, wriggling opponent until they hear the referee's whistle.

For such a physical sport, some males may express concerns over applying force on a female or pressing against a female opponent in the era of the #MeToo movement.

But, Gallegos said, the concerns are a nonissue because she knows exactly what she's signing up for every time she steps up to the mat.

"It's kind of unheard of in the wrestling community for a girl to say something happened during a match," she said. "It's wrestling, and I think we all understand that it's a very physical sport. You're literally fighting someone to put them to their back."

In her hundreds of matches against guys, Gallegos said, she has never experienced those sorts of issues. She encourages men to approach wrestling female athletes the same way they would with male athletes.

"You know you might get pinned. You might win by one or two points. You might even pin me," Gallegos said. "But, I'm definitely worth giving a match to."

Her message for male wrestlers who might be reluctant to face off with her?

"Just wrestle me."

<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/10/701863071/instead-of-wrestling-a-girl-high-schooler-chooses-to-forfeit-state-wrestling-mat>