



The gym, itself, is unremarkable. It is old, small, with three wrestling mats being rudely encroached upon by the padded walls at either end, and devoid of anything to make it stand out from a thousand other places scattered across the country. That is, until you read the sign on the wall, letting you know you have entered the home of Perry wrestling since 1922. The small Oklahoma town with a population around 5000 has an incredible tradition of success on the mat, including 41 team state titles, a national record. Since 1961, the Maroons, haven't suffered through a single three-year title drought, keeping that amazing statistic alive last February when they put together a phenomenal Saturday morning run in the consolations, holding off Heritage Hall, 133-117. Since 1976, Perry has welcomed some of the best teams in the region to their home turf each year for the Perry Tournament of Champions. In all that time, despite all their success at the state tournament, the home team has never lifted the championship trophy.

As a kid growing up wrestling in Oklahoma, Perry was well known to me. The tradition that started with the likes of Jack Vanbebber and Danny Hodge, who combined for six NCAA titles, as well as a pair of Olympic gold medal match appearances, including Vanbebber's win in 1932, had evolved into a simple expectation. Boys in Perry wrestled. I'd been in their gym before as a competitor, but it had been a long time. When I got the chance to make the trip for the 42<sup>nd</sup> Perry Tournament of Champions, I couldn't wait to get back there. As I would learn, there is much about the town, the program, and the people that hasn't changed. However, that hasn't kept progress from being made in some key areas and my weekend in Perry made me believe that this historic program won't be losing their spot at the top anytime soon.

The obvious step forward for this year's edition of the tournament was that, for the first time, it would be streamed live on the internet and use TrackWrestling to run the event. This seems commonplace in today's environment, but it was a big step for a competition where the brackets had been done by hand for 40 years. Even this weekend, the hand-operated scoreboard on the gym floor, sitting on a table that had the signatures of students dating back decades, was continuously updated, a fitting reminder that this event won't be forgetting where it came from anytime soon. One of the main reasons Perry has never won their own tournament is the quality of the field they have attracted to their competition. Adding live video and up to the minute

results available online not only exposes this good wrestling to the rest of the world but could help the event become even stronger in the future. That this first run of the event on Track went smoothly should help convince any remaining skeptics.

This isn't the first major change for the program in recent years, though. When Perry head coach Ronnie Delk took over for Scott Chenoweth in May of 2011, he became the first head man that was not a Perry graduate since 1931. It wasn't as if Delk's resume was lacking, of course. The two-time state champion from Collinsville wrestled for Oklahoma State during their last run of NCAA titles and had been an assistant under Chenoweth for four years before earning the promotion. In many places, this sort of hire would barely have registered. However, with Perry's wonderful tradition, there was no shortage of Perry graduates that could have replaced Chenoweth. In a place where you might find the owner of the oldest continuously operated restaurant in the state donning a Perry Maroons wrestling t-shirt, this was a hot topic of conversation. However, the fiery Delk piloted the team to titles in 2013, 2014 and 2017, seeming to entrench himself as a qualified caretaker of the Perry legacy.

Just down the street from the cafe is another recent change, the magnificent Perry Wrestling Monument Park where statues of Vanbebber and Hodge perch atop a wrestling mat. They are flanked by black signs detailing the history of Perry wrestling, ensuring any visitor who happens by understands what this town is all about. Most of this information can also be found where the Maroons practice, which is notably bigger than their competition gym, but the move to have it alongside their own giants of the sport in a public place further underscore the value this community places on the sport. The values of "character, grit, determination, and effort" match what citizens of the town value in life. That they want to celebrate the sport that has taught those values to so many of their own is no surprise.

To further spread that message, Chance Leonard, a two-time state champion for Perry who received the Medal of Courage from the Oklahoma chapter of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, is heading a team that is making a documentary called *The Price of Legacy: Wrestling with a Dynasty*. Meeting Leonard, it is immediately apparent he is intensely proud of his hometown and his favorite sport. He wants to share the common story that unites him with so many over the years. It isn't the winning that is so valuable to Perry, though that certainly helps, as much as it is the constant production of young men who have learned life lessons by going through the program. Leonard wants to ensure that message is passed on, leading him to become the driving force behind the movie.

With all of this surrounding the young men who donned the maroon singlets this weekend, attempting to upset nationally ranked Choctaw to win their own tournament for the first time ever, there would seem to be a lot of pressure. However, that pressure is just another part of wrestling in Perry. The expectations are high and you seemingly can't turn around in the town without seeing a multiple-time state champion. Still, this is what these wrestlers live for. Time and time again this weekend, they acquitted themselves well, even on the rare occasion where they were a little outgunned. Perry entered the final day right on the heels of Choctaw and all anyone in town wanted to know was, "Can they win it?" The semi-final round at 10 am Saturday morning would make all the difference.

In the end, as has happened in every edition of the Perry Tournament of Champions, a squad from somewhere else got the best of the Maroons. Choctaw pulled away with a strong performance, particularly in the upper weights, to win with Perry finishing second for the fifth time. There was remarkably little disappointment to be found, though. This is what Perry wrestling is all about. Bring in as much strong competition as you can, test yourself, even if it means losing in your home gym, then go out and claim another state title in February. Grit and determination mean bouncing back when you come up short. In that way, this was just another weekend of teachable moments. With all the positive changes being made in Perry, we can expect many more years of life lessons to come.

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