



*Tela Bacher, black and pink shirt center right, with the 14 girls participating in the Wrestle Like A Girl clinic during the DC State Athletic Association Wrestling Championships.*

Young girls break barriers and change perceptions both on and off the mat

By Samuel Lee

Wrestling has been a sport dominated by men and boys. But at the D.C. State Athletic Association Wrestling Championships on Saturday at St. Albans School, girls competed against – and in some cases – beat the boys.

During one of the breaks of the tournament, 14 young girls joined Tela Bacher, the National Camps manager for Wrestle Like a Girl and a 2004 Olympian in women’s wrestling, for an hour-long clinic.

“Wrestle like a girl.” A statement that, along with its numerous variations, have stereotyped women in sports by telling them that they aren’t good enough or don’t belong.

However, for the girls competing that Saturday afternoon and the D.C. non-profit organization, it has taken a completely new meaning. It has become a slogan that they hope will change the perception that girls cannot be wrestlers or compete in other physical sports.

“It’s really about owning it,” said Bacher. “It’s to say I wrestle smart, with passion, and with fierceness. I am not less than.”

However, the fight to change that stigma about girl wrestlers has not been easy.

Archie Hogan, the wrestling coach at Jackson-Reed High School who has two girls on his team, said that one of the biggest challenges to growing girl's wrestling in the district is that there simply aren't many opportunities.

Bacher said that the most important step to growing girl's wrestling is providing an opportunity for girls to wrestle other girls. This past January, the D.C. State Athletic Association held its inaugural girl's wrestling invitational.

While there still aren't enough girls wrestling in the district to have a state championship, the invitational is nevertheless a beginning to making wrestling a viable option for these young girls.

And with an unprecedented increase in girl's wrestling around the country, Hogan is optimistic that girl's wrestling will continue to grow in the district as well.

In [2010-11](#), about 7,000 of the 281,000 high school students wrestling in the country were girls. In 2021-22, that number grew to 31,000 of 263,000 high school students, nearly a 431% increase. There are also now 159 [women college wrestling programs](#), of which 58 compete in NCAA Division I.



*Tela Bacher, pink shirt, has a 1-on-1 session with Jennah ElBardicy, blue sweater, before the start of the Wrestle Like A Girl clinic.*

However, wrestling is more than simply a battle of strength, speed, ingenuity, and technique. Among the 14 young girls who participated in the clinic with Bacher was 12-year-old Jennah ElBardicy.

ElBardicy started wrestling because her parents wanted her to learn a sport that she could use to defend herself. However, wrestling came to mean more to ElBardicy than what even her mother, Yasmin Amer, had anticipated.

ElBardicy said that she enjoys wrestling, and that she has learned a lot from the sport that extends beyond the circle on a wrestling mat.

"[Wrestling] taught me more discipline. To work hard even when no one's looking because that's how you become a champion," ElBardicy said.

Even Amer has seen how wrestling has helped her daughter grow.

“She grew in confidence... She also gained a resilient mindset, never giving up and going against boys,” Amer said.

Amer also said that confidence and resiliency are needed for girls to not be afraid as they break into a male-dominated sport such as wrestling, as well as a male-dominated society.

It is no longer that these girls are too boyish because they wrestle. It is instead that these young girls are just showing off their true strength. “Wrestling develops a type of confidence that is hard to get... If you can do tough things like wrestle in front of a crowd, as a girl, then you can do anything,” said Bacher.