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## SPORTS

# Familiar foes become friends as Triton-Highland merge wrestling programs

**Tom McGurk** Cherry Hill Courier-Post

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Craig Johnson will always be true to the Triton red and blue.

However, the senior is finding Columbia blue, the color of an archrival high school, isn't bad either.

Especially since that school - Highland - is giving Johnson and a few of his Triton teammates the opportunity to wrestle this season.

Due to low participation numbers at Triton, the Mustangs have joined forces with their sister school in the Black Horse School District to compete in the six-week wrestling season, which begins next week.

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Johnson admits he was more than a little skeptical when the idea of a co-op program was developed over the winter.

"I was kind of annoyed at first," said Johnson, a three-year letter winner and a captain for the Mustangs last season. "The idea of wrestling for another team, especially a rival, just didn't seem right. I wanted to finish out my (high school) career with the school I want to represent.

"When I first heard it was happening, I'm said, I'm running spring track instead."

It took only one practice for Johnson to realize he's glad he didn't give up on grappling.

"After that first practice, I was all good with it," said Johnson, who hails from the Glendora section of Gloucester Township. "I like it over there. I feel comfortable in the room there."

And it certainly beats the alternative – no wrestling.

According to Triton athletic director Keith Williams, the Mustangs' wrestling program had dwindled to eight athletes, including one female.

"It came to the point where it wasn't going to be fair for our kids or fair to our opponents to compete with the low number of wrestlers we had," Williams said.

Williams got the ball rolling about a co-op program, which have become more prevalent in South Jersey over recent years with combinations like Gateway-Woodbury, Bordentown-Florence, Clayton-Glassboro and Schalick-Cumberland.

Highland made the most sense since it was in the same school district, and in close proximity to Triton. The co-op program got approval from the NJSIAA in an emergency meeting on Feb. 10.

Williams hopes the participation numbers will rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic and this will be a one-year partnership.

"Seven of the eight wrestlers we sent over there will be back next season," Williams said. "Our goal is to get these kids over there, get them working out and develop their skills and get them back here next year at Triton."

Highland athletic director Mike Berger said the Tartans' participation numbers, like at many programs around South Jersey, are a little down, too. He said Highland's number has floated around 20 before the addition of Triton's wrestlers.

"It's about giving these kids the opportunity to compete," said Berger, who was a Region 7 runner-up during his scholastic wrestling days at Holy Cross. "If it turns into something long-term that's fine but that's not the goal here."

The Triton-Highland rivalry has been heated at times across sports. Last Thanksgiving, the annual Turkey Day game between the schools was stopped with eight minutes left in the fourth quarter when a brawl broke out on the field; the game wasn't completed.

Wrestling has always been a little different between the two programs though, mainly because of Highland's longtime status as one of the state's powerhouses during the 1980s and 1990s.

Highland head coach Frank Plefka said he hasn't been disappointed by the way the kids have handled the merger.

“We’re one week in, but it’s been a very positive experience so far,” said Plefka, who wrestled in the Triton midgets when he was a kid. “There is this neighborhood rivalry between the two schools. I don’t know if we could do this if it was football, but I think wrestling is a little different.”

Plefka said there were some concerns voiced by his new wrestlers like what singlet would they be wearing (they will be wearing Tartan singlets) or if they could wear Triton gear to practice (yes), but there were two things that he would guarantee to them:

“One, there would be no favorites, if you want to wrestle off, you wrestle off. Two, you’re going to have a great experience here,” Plefka said.

Wrestlers working toward the same goal tend to bring a strong bond and this experience is no different so far.

“We’ve always preached here about being all together in one family, now our family is just a little bit bigger,” Highland senior standout and Rider commit Matt Hoelke said. “It’s still relatively new, but it’s definitely been smooth so far. Personally, I think it’s been great.

“If this Highland-Triton thing is going to be around for years to come, it was great to be a part of this in the beginning and show the future guys that it can work.”

The new-look Tartans will open their season on Thursday when they host Pennsville on the Blackwood campus.

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