

MAKING MEDALISTS

Head wrestling coach continues to send athletes to State, most of whom medal, more than 25 years after his arrival at North in 1986

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Erik Caldwell. Matt Kanipe. Steve Pisciotta.

These are just three of the 10 State Champions Wrestling Coach Harold Ritchie has worked with, and only three of the 66 State Medalists he's coached. 66.

It all started in 1979 when four wrestlers went to State.

It was the big culmination of their seasons. The final tournament. For the seniors, this was it. It was do or die.

"It's intense," Ritchie said. "Everyone wants to be a State Medalist."

Two wrestlers came back with medals. Not half bad for a brand new coach. Not half bad at all.

Having been a wrestler since he was seven years old, Ritchie inevitably wrestled in high school. The dedication he has as a coach was instilled when he was a high school student. He won State as a high schooler, and went on to wrestle for four years at the University of Missouri-Columbia (Mizzou). In his last year of college, he was the As-

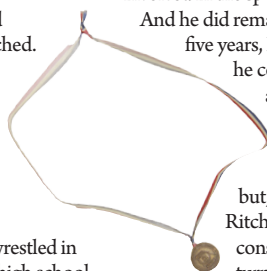
sistant coach at Mizzou. After graduating from Mizzou in 1979, he coached wrestling at Ritenour High School for three years.

"Wrestling is a big part of my life," Ritchie said. "Coaching was a way to keep me involved in the sport."

And he did remain involved. After leaving Ritenour in 1981 and not coaching for five years, Ritchie came to North in 1986. In his second year of coaching here, he coached a State Champion, Jason Sexon, his first at North. Sexon also became Ritchie's second and third State Champion, when he defended his title for two more years.

Ritchie believes part of this success is solely based on the athletes' mentalities. He works with a lot of non-athletic people, but, because of their mind set, they learn to become better athletes. Ritchie believes athletes' mind sets develop quicker when they listen to constructive criticism. This, eventually, produces great athletes. And in turn medalists. State Medalists.

"They have to let the mental aspect sink in," Ritchie said. "We can talk about it forever, 365 days we can talk about it, but it has to sink in. A bell kinda goes





Coach **Harold Ritchie** stands by his wall of medalists. On this wall, in his classroom, he places pictures of all the wrestlers who have won medals at State. The pictures are provided by MSHSAA after the Tournament. They go as far back as 1986. (paige martinez)

Coach **Harold Ritchie** demonstrates a wrestling move with his son, junior **Sam Ritchie**, at a pre-season practice. Ritchie's eldest son, also named Harold, won three state medals for FHN, and Sam has qualified his freshman and sophomore year, and is aiming to medal this season. (paige martinez)

off for them, and then they get it."

In 1997, it clicked for one wrestler. When he started, he showed promise. He was focused and always thought ahead. He always wanted to know what he did wrong and how he could get better. After matches he'd go up to Ritchie and ask him for advice. He worked on his technique. Ritchie would show the moves and practice with him. This is how social studies teacher Sean Fowler won his State Championship.

"I want everyone to be working for a State Championship," Ritchie said.

And then they just keep coming: The state trips. The medals. The success.

By 2003, Ritchie had coached a total of five State Champions, three of which had won multiple times.

Twenty-seven years later, Ritchie is still here. He's still coaching. But most importantly, he's still coaching State Medalists. But, he's not nearly satisfied. He wants to be like the other schools; the ones that have Champions every year.

"I would say [my coaching style] is no nonsense," Ritchie said. "It's very intense. I push wrestlers to be the best. I'm hopefully building State Champions."

Last year, in the most recent of the State trips, 2013 alumnus Tyler Smith brought back a fifth place medal. He credits this to Ritchie, who taught him everything he knows. Ritchie, along with Assistant Varsity Coach Chris Brown, taught him and his fellow wrestlers the new moves by demonstrating them on each other. Ritchie focused on helping the wrestlers on their technique. Brown, more of a hands on coach, wrestled with Smith. They still use this coaching style today.

"It's easier to help them [wrestlers] with their technique when you wrestle them," Brown said. "You can quickly see what's wrong."

Ritchie's favorite part of the whole process is when athletes believe in themselves and prove the expectations wrong. These small and spread out moments are what keep him coming back every year. He comes back for the athlete that isn't that great at wrestling. The one that progresses and gradually gets better. The one that was a nobody and became a somebody. The journey is what Ritchie lives for.

"Those few moments make it exciting all over," Ritchie said. "There's usually few and they're very far in between. But every year, it's glorious seeing the wrestlers' accomplishments."



This year, he hopes to have many of those moments. He has about four wrestlers with Varsity experience, leading a fairly young team. A team with potential and lots of it.

"We'll have growing pains this year," Ritchie said. "It is a younger team."

But, they also have a lot of hard working athletes. Ones who will learn how to be mentally tough. Ones who are going to have to want a State Championship more than anyone else. But, most importantly, ones who will transform in front of their coaches' eyes, and bring Ritchie to another State Medalists so he can continue the legacy.

"I'm pretty proud of all of them [State Champions], as well as the other medalists," Ritchie said. "I guess I'm just a little greedy because I always want more."