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Boys Wrestling Girls — A Clash of Worlds and Worldviews

I, for one, am proud to know of a boy and a family who refuse to consider girls and women as proper opponents on a wrestling mat — opponents to be bloodied, gouged, and slammed. Joel Northrup may have defaulted a match, but he refused to sacrifice his Christian conscience for a moment of earthly glory.

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The state of Iowa takes high school wrestling seriously. Iowans take wrestling so seriously, in fact, that the state wrestling champion among high school boys in Iowa is like “Mr. Basketball” in Indiana — a celebrity for life. Joel Northrup is only a sophomore, but the home-schooled student who wrestles for Linn-Mar High School went into the state wrestling tournament with a 35-4 record and high hopes.



Nevertheless, in his first match, he defaulted. Why? Because he could not by conviction wrestle against a girl.

In a statement released to the media, young Northrup said: “I have a tremendous amount of respect for Cassy and Megan and their accomplishments. However, wrestling is a combat sport and it can get violent at times. As a matter of conscience and my faith I do not believe that is appropriate for a boy to engage a girl in this manner. It is unfortunate that I have been placed in a situation not seen in most other high school sports in Iowa.”

For the first time in history, girls competed in this year’s Iowa state wrestling tournament. Cassy Herkelman and Megan Black became the first two girls to compete in the big event. Joel Northrup drew Cassy Herkelman as his first-round opponent. As the Associated Press reported, Joel “refused to compete against a girl at the state tournament . . . relinquishing any chance of becoming a champion because he says wrestling with a girl would conflict with his religious beliefs.”

The debate erupted immediately. Cassy’s father, Bill Herkelman spoke of his respect for Joel and the Northrup family. “I sincerely respect the decision of the Northrup family especially since it was made on the biggest stage in wrestling. I have heard nothing but good things about the Northrup family and hope Joel does very well the remainder of the tourney.”

As it turned out, Joel did not fare well in the consolation rounds, and Cassy lost a subsequent round, as well. There was apparently more talk about the match that didn’t happen than about the many matches that were completed. The national media attention quickly focused on Joel’s decision not to wrestle a girl.

Writing at ESPN.com, columnist Sarah Spain offered her assessment:

If he felt some sort of need to protect Herkelman from the violence of the sport, he’s sorely misguided. She chose to compete, and she competed well enough to qualify for the state meet. The physical nature of sport is, by definition, what makes it sport, so no one would have complained had he beaten her fair and square in an athletic competition. The best way to show respect for Herkelman and her accomplishments would have been to compete against her.

Well, it may well be true that “no one would have complained” had Joel defeated Cassy on the mat, but that does not mean that it would have been right for him to do so. Indeed, the idea of high school boys wrestling against high school

girls is, to say the very least, a rather modern invention. Girls are demanding to wrestle, but a wrestling program for girls would require far more girls wanting to participate in the sport than have yet indicated such a willingness. So, state officials decided that girls could compete with the boys.

In defaulting the match, Joel Northrup cited his concern that wrestling is a physical sport that often turns violent. When he said, “I do not believe that it is appropriate for a boy to engage a girl in this manner,” he was only expressing what would have been taken as common sense and common decency just a few years ago.

In response to Joel’s statement, Sarah Spain wondered aloud what many others were thinking: “It’s tough to tell whether Northrup is actually concerned about harming Herkelman or if he’s just worried about accidentally touching parts of her that he might never have touched on a girl before. If he or his parents were uncomfortable with the prolonged physical contact and the very high possibility that he might grab, for lack of a better term, a ‘lady part,’ then I suppose it’s tough to reprimand him for defaulting.”

Clearly. But the great unfairness is that this boy was put in such a position in the first place. His failure to cite the sexual nature of his concerns reflects a basic sense of decency and propriety. It would have embarrassed both Joel and the girls in the tournament for such a concern, though obvious, to be articulated. But, given the nature of the sport, there is no way that a boy and a girl wrestling as opponents in a competitive match would not have contact where boys and girls should not have contact. In fact, we are talking about contact of a nature that the boy would be in great and proper trouble if the contact happened anywhere else.

Rick Reilly, author of ESPN’s influential “Life of Reilly” column, offered no respect for Joel’s decision:

Remember, Northrup didn’t default on sexual grounds. Didn’t say anything about it being wrong to put his hands in awkward places. Both he and his father, Jamie, a minister in an independent Pentecostal faith called Believers in Grace Fellowship, cited the physical pounding of it.

“We believe in the elevation and respect of woman,” the father told the Des Moines Register, “and we don’t think that wrestling a woman is the right thing to do. Body slamming and takedowns — full contact sport is not how to do that.”

That’s where the Northrups are so wrong. Body slams and takedowns and gouges in the eye and elbows in the ribs are exactly how to respect Cassy Herkelman. This is what she lives for. She can elevate herself, thanks.

This is insanity masquerading as athletic competition. The controversy over the Iowa state wrestling tournament reveals the fact that this debate represents a clash of worlds and worldviews. In one world — the world that increasingly demands the total erasure of distinctions between men and women — Joel Northrup is considered to be a religious nut. In this world, it makes sense that girls wrestle against boys and that society should celebrate this new development as a milestone in the struggle to free ourselves from the limitations of all gender roles. As if to make this point impossible to miss, Bill Herkelman, Cassy’s father, said: “She’s my son. She’s always been my son.”

In the other world, Joel Northrup is seen as a young man of brave and noble conscience — a boy who defaulted a match rather than violate his conscience. The statements offered by Joel and his father are seen as moments of temporary sanity in a world going increasingly mad. The chivalry demonstrated at great personal cost by this boy athlete is to be celebrated, affirmed, and acknowledged as being deeply rooted in his Christian convictions — convictions about gender, modesty, the treatment of girls and women, propriety, decorum, and sexual purity.

In Rick Reilly’s world, and in accord with his worldview, it makes sense to say, “Body slams and takedowns and gouges in the eye and elbows in the ribs are exactly how to respect Cassy Herkelman.”

In Joel Northrup’s world, and in accord with his worldview, that statement is nothing less than insanity.

I, for one, am proud to know of a boy and a family who refuse to consider girls and women as proper opponents on a wrestling mat — opponents to be bloodied, gouged, and slammed. Joel Northrup may have defaulted a match, but he refused to sacrifice his Christian conscience for a moment of earthly glory.

The general direction of the culture is clear: we are moving out of Joel Northrup’s world into Rick Reilly’s world.

Along the way, something immeasurably more important than a wrestling match is about to be defaulted.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

“[Rather than Face Girl, Wrestler Defaults](#),” The Associated Press, ESPN.com, Thursday, February 17, 2011.

Sarah Spain, “[Iowa Athlete Wrestles with Tough Decision](#),” ESPN.com, Thursday, February 17, 2011.

Rick Reilly, “[Wrestling with Conviction](#),” ESPN.com, Saturday, February 19, 2011.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “[Should Boys Be Forced to Wrestle Girls?](#),” AlbertMohler.com, Tuesday, May 10, 2005.

“[Should Boys Wrestle Girls?](#),” *The Albert Mohler Program*, Monday, May 9, 2005. Listen [here](#).

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