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Adults and youth in the Liberal Wrestling Club take a breather from practice in the Liberal High School gym. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times During the school year during the hours just after the school day are done, young athletes can frequently be seen in the portion of Liberal High School commonly known as the Big House. Those athletes frequently work on the fundamentals of basketball and getting some exercise when the weather is not so pleasant outside to stay in shape for football and track and field season.

For the last 20 years, though, another group of athletes has been seen in a gym adjacent to the Big House taking to wrestling mats.

Currently headed up by coach Sheldon Pipkin, the Liberal Wrestling Club takes in practice matches on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and club spokesman Kerry Seibel said several other coaches are involved in training the current and future grapplers.

“We have some of them that separate out and work with the younger kids only,” she said. “We have some that separate out and work with the bigger kids.” Seibel called the wrestling club a

hidden secret in Liberal, and she said kids can start learning the fundamentals of the sport as early as age 4. “How to do it properly, not to get hurt, different techniques, new moves,” she said. “We’ve had kids for whom this is their first time, and they’ve had undefeated records or they’ve done really, really well. We’ve had several kids that have earned pins each tournament.”

Club members attend several tournaments throughout the year in communities all over Kansas, including Dodge City, Garden City, Hays, Leoti and Plainville, just to name a few.

“We have the subdistricts in Pratt and districts in Dodge City,” Seibel said. “These kids have been practicing two nights a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. It starts in November and goes through state on Easter weekend. This is for folk style wrestling. Some of them choose to go on and do freestyle, but we mainly stop in March.”

Seibel said as of right now, 41 kids are signed up for the club.

“We get anywhere from 25 to 35 at a given time at practice,” she said.

Seibel said club officials send out information to Liberal schools, and many interested youngsters take home that information, which is also distributed to other wrestling clubs.

“They come in, and we do an application process,” she said. “They get a wrestling card.”

Younger kids generally practice from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m., with older youth going sometimes as late as 8:30 p.m.

“A lot of them work hard outside of here trying to make weight or learning new stuff,” Seibel said.

That hard work paid off for one young man recently. Cash Carson, age 6, recently took home a state championship in the 6 and under category, and Seibel said Carson had some quality competition along the way.

“They were all state qualifiers,” Seibel said. “They’ve been state champions several years in a row. He had competition at 6 and under where a lot of them started at 4 years old. If their birthday hits anywhere before Aug. 31, they could be 7. He’s wrestling 4 to 7 year olds, and some of them have been wrestling for years, generations of wrestlers.”

Adults and youth alike were understandably excited for Carson.

“We did a big presentation during practice and let all the little kids know that this is what hard work gets you,” Seibel said. “At this tournament, they place medal wise, first, second, third, fourth. That’s another accomplishment for these kids. They take home a medal. That’s what they’re all working for.”

Seibel said everyone involved with the club has had, and will continue to have, a good time.

“It’s fun,” she said. “I think they all enjoy coming out here, learning new stuff. We’re getting new members in. We certainly would like the club to grow in both wrestlers and coaches.”

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