

Going to the



KAREN WINK / AMERICAN PRESS

St. Louis Catholic wrestling head coach Terry Gage, left, instructs Thomas Vogel during a match with Basile's Gavin Cortez. Southwest Louisiana teams will compete in the state tournament this weekend at the Pontchartrain Center in Kenner.

Grappling to gain popularity

BY WARREN ARCENEUX
AMERICAN PRESS

While Barbe is in the early stages of developing a wrestling program, the St. Louis Saints are ready to contend for titles.

The Bucs are in their first year of competition, while the Saints are looking to produce their first state champion this year, their third in competition. The Saints will have a pair of top seeds — Chaz Oubre and Louis Stutes — at the state tournament this weekend at the Pontchartrain Center in Kenner.

Oubre is the top seed in the 170-pound weight class, Stutes in the 160-pound class.

The duo have taken opposite

paths to this point. Stutes, son of Saints assistant Rusty Stutes, came up through the Junior Saints program and has been wrestling for six years. Oubre had never wrestled before joining the inaugural St. Louis team as a sophomore.

Oubre didn't even sign up for the team that first year.

"People were just signing each other's name up as a joke," he said. "But then I went to take a look at it and loved it. I liked that it was an individual sport and that it took a combination of strength and athleticism."

Oubre got off to a fast start, winning his first four junior varsity matches before running into more experienced opponents.

"When I started going against varsity wrestlers who had experience, I could not win anything," he

said. "I had not won any matches, but then we got to the state tournament, I went 2-3 and finished in fifth place. Then last year I finished third. This year I hope I can win it."

Oubre said learning how to counter opponents was the most difficult thing to learn.

"Learning what other people want to do to you and how to stop it was the toughest thing for me to learn," he said. "You always know what you want to do to the other guy."

While Oubre learned on the fly, Stutes came to high school with experience from the Junior Saints wrestling program, which was started by former South Cameron wrestler Jody Lavergne, Rusty's work partner. The program allows kids as young as 5 to start learning the sport.

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"Me and my buddies went to try it in the sixth grade and I loved it," Stutes said. "I loved the technique of it, that you have to motivate yourself to get better, and I love the hard work that it requires."

"I was not that good at the start, but I have gotten better and gotten more self-confident."

While Oubre starred on the Saints football team as a linebacker, Stutes gave up the gridiron to focus on wrestling.

Stutes said wrestling is a sport that a variety of people can excel in.

"In wrestling you do not have to be big as in some other sports; you are always going against someone your size," he said. "It is a great way to get in shape, and it is all about hard work."

Guiding the Saints program are Rusty Stutes and head coach Terry Gage, who started a program at Baker High three decades ago, then came out of retirement from the day job he held for 27 years to start the wrestling program at St. Louis.

"The first year was a learning process, but to be where we are in the third year is unheard of," Gage said. "We were undefeated this year in head-to-head meets and have a chance to finish in the top five at state. When Stutes and I started the program, we did not want it to be a Band-Aid program, we wanted it to be a great program, something the

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Parry LaLande Jr.
Barbe wrestling coach

school could be proud of. We want these kids to look back 20 years from now and say that they are part of the program's legacy and they helped lay the foundation."

Gage said the highlight of the program is senior Jared Amiot earning the program's first spot on the podium at the state meet two years ago. Amiot missed this season due to a knee injury but has remained involved in the program, assisting Gage and Stutes at practice and working with the younger wrestlers.

Amiot turned to wrestling while looking for a way to stay in shape after not making the Saints soccer team, and he liked the individuality of the sport.

"It all falls on your shoulders, how hard you work," Amiot said. "That first year, my heart was racing before the first match, I was dreading having my number called, but once I stepped on the mat all that left my mind. I didn't

win that first match and didn't win at all during the season, but I kept learning and working at it and kept getting better. Then by the time we got to state, I had a big jump in confidence, was able to win two matches and finish sixth.

"This injury is tough to take since it is my senior year, but it has been fun staying involved and working with the other guys. The team has come a long way."

Barbe is taking the first steps on the journey to competitiveness. The Bucs will send eight wrestlers to Kenner to continue the learning process in a season that has produced plenty of bumps and bruises. Three of the Bucs are injured and will not compete.

Bucs head coach Parry LaLande Jr. said about 40 kids attended the first meeting, but many did not have an idea of what wrestling was.

"Half of them thought it was mixed martial arts or WWE-type stuff," he said. "But the ones that are still here enjoy it, they like that it is more of an individual sport. It is not like football where you can say the offensive line did not block for you or someone missed a tackle."

"It takes a special kid to do it, especially in a first-year program where you know every time you go out there you will be an underdog. It takes a lot of mental toughness. It is demanding, you have got to be strong and a lot of condition-

ing goes into it."

LaLande said interest in the program has grown as the year has progressed, and he is looking to get younger students involved.

"That is the biggest thing, getting younger kids in the program so we will have some experience," he said. "I coach football too so I can't start working on wrestling until December."

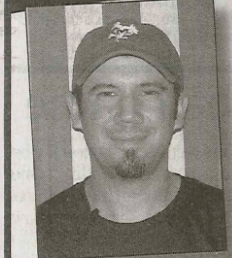
"It's hard when you have to spend time teaching kids what a wrestling stance is. If we can get kids with some kind of experience before they get here, it would help with the learning curve. We have been able to progress to the point where the kids know how and when to make basic moves, but the people we are wrestling that have been doing it for years will know more advanced moves."

The Bucs also have plans to train over the summer, and longtime Sulphur head coach Jean Paul Duhon has been helping LaLande get the program going.

"I hope it becomes sustainable," LaLande said. "From where we started to where we are now, the improvement has been huge. For some kids, not having much success is frustrating, but you can see where we are more competitive and have a little more confidence. The biggest thing for us will be getting involved in the juniors; that will help to build interest."

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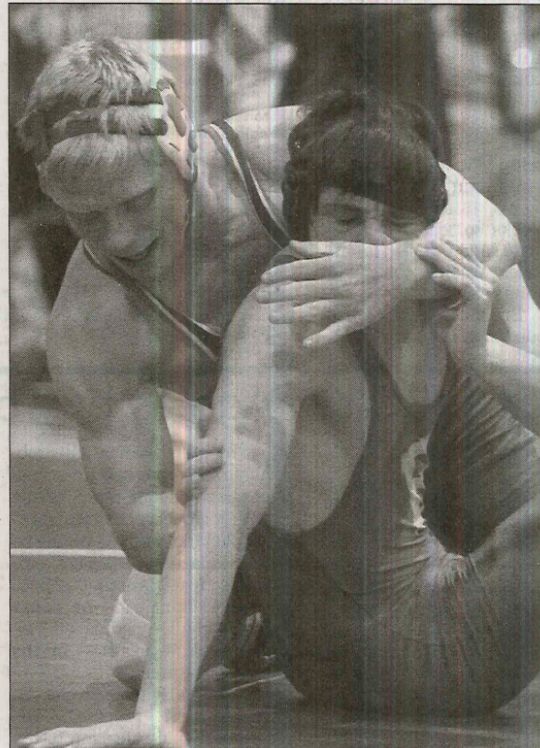
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St. Louis Catholic's Louis Stutes, left, works to pin Basile's Trenton Pelloquin to the mat.