

Youth Culture Lesson
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Pinned: Wrestler Forfeits Match to Follow His Beliefs

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What Happened:

For most high school athletes, just to compete in the state championships is a huge honor—the culmination of months, sometimes years, of dedication and hard work. Few would miss that opportunity for anything. In Iowa, one athlete gave up his chance to compete for a state championship—to follow his faith.

Joel Northrup, a sophomore competing for Linn-Mar High School, forfeited his first-round match after learning he was set to compete against Cassy Herkelman, one of two girls competing in the state wrestling tournament.

“I have a tremendous amount of respect for Cassy and Megan (Black, the other girl who qualified) and their accomplishments,” Northrup said. “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 it is appropriate for a boy to engage a girl in this manner.”

Northrup was 35-4 this season, making him one of the top contenders in the 112-pound division. He also belongs to an independent Pentecostal church called Grace Fellowship, and his father’s the minister there. The church teaches that unmarried young men and women shouldn’t touch each other too familiarly.

“We believe in the elevation and respect of women, and we don’t think wrestling a woman is the right thing to do,” Grace Pastor Bill Randles told CBS News. “Body slamming and takedowns, that full contact sport is not how to do that.”

The church didn’t force Northrup to forfeit. “It’s totally his choice,” Randle added. “He’s a young man now, and he’s worked hard to get where he’s gotten. It’s up to him, and it was his conviction.”

Three years ago, Northrup also refused to wrestle Megan Black—and Black harbors no ill will. “If it’s his religion and he’s strong in his religion, then I just respect that,” Black said. “Obviously, everyone can be pointing fingers at him. He, at least, is true to his beliefs, and you have to respect that. It takes a lot for a 15- or 16-year-old boy to do that.”

Talk About It:

Not everyone would agree with Northrup’s decision. Many Christians would say there’s nothing inherently wrong with wrestling a girl. Do you think he did the right thing?

Whatever you think about Northrup forfeiting, the fact that he chose to do so still says something about the wrestler's character. "We're really raising kids who are going to be bigger than wrestling," said Marth Stetzel, whose sons also competed at state, "and if it's something that he believes strongly in—which is not necessarily what I would do—you've got to respect a kid like that."

Can it be hard to follow your beliefs? Have you ever sacrificed something in order to do what you thought was right? How did that make you feel?

On the flip side, we've all probably done something in our lives that went against what we believe. Can you think of a time when you did something you knew you probably shouldn't? Why? Was it because it was easier? Because you thought it'd be fun? Did you feel bad about it afterward?

What the Bible Says:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35).

"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (Isa. 7:9).

"All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart" (Prov. 21:2).