

# Prep notebook - Montana teams to host Japanese Exchange wrestling team Thursday

- KYLE HOUGHTALING Kyle.houghtaling@missoulain.com
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Sports have a way of bringing people together -- even athletes that are worlds apart.

On Thursday, the Japan Cultural Exchange wrestling team is slated to take on wrestlers from Missoula Big Sky and Missoula Hellgate at 6 p.m. at the Eagles' gym. It's the first stop in a wrestling and sightseeing tour of Montana for the Japanese team.

And according to Big Sky wrestling coach Lanny Bryant, who has helped cultivate this exchange along several stops throughout his legendary career, the exchange is about more than the time spent on the mat.

"What's really neat about it, it teaches -- you really get some insight about the world," Big Sky's Bryant said. "... It kind of gives you some insight as to what the world's really like and what we go through. There's misunderstandings, and there's things we learn through our cultures.

"That's what it's really all about -- the wrestling is kind of secondary. "

The 13 members and two coaches of the exchange team will stay with some Big Sky wrestler's and their families through Friday morning, before the exchange team travels to Ronan for a mixer portion of the Western A duals.

"Hopefully we can give them a little cultural education on the Flathead Indian Reservation, that way they can get a little bit of the cultural exchange and not just leave here with the wrestling background," Ronan coach James Muir said.

Big Sky's host families were at Missoula International Airport on Wednesday to pick up the exchange team.

"I drove them from the airport to Big Sky -- they definitely were impressed with the cold weather," said Robert Skillicorn, Big Sky wrestler Brody and Isaac's father. "I just dropped off the four exchange wrestlers at my house with my wife and two boys and they were hitting it off great when I left.

"The exchange wrestlers were actually outside throwing snowballs at each other and playing on the swing set in the yard."

Then it was off to practice at Big Sky High School in preparation of Thursday's meet over 5,000 miles in the making.

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**The exchange program is something** coach Bryant started back in 1967 when he was coaching in Wyoming. He brought the idea along with him when he coached at Western Washington State College, where one of the exchange wrestlers actually came to live with the Bryant family.

"He actually went to school at Western Washington and stayed with us. He ended up staying with us for six years. He became one of the family," Bryant said. "I have five kids, and he just has become one of them."

Naturally the program followed Bryant when he coached at Hellgate, Montana State University and now Big Sky. It's been two winters since the last exchange meet in Missoula, which then served as the Eagles' senior night.

There, three-time state champion Luke Entzel, now wrestling at Iowa State, chose to wrestle his opponent in freestyle -- used in international events -- as opposed to folkstyle, used in the U.S.

"They don't wrestle folkstyle in Japan at all, and I wrestled some freestyle in the offseason, and I figured I'd go out there and see how tough that competition is," Entzel said of his gesture two years ago.

Coach Bryant also takes a team of 13 Montana wrestlers to Japan in the summer as part of the swap. In similar fashion, the Montana wrestlers stay with host families and venture across the country taking in the sights and culture of Japan, and they wrestle freestyle, rather than folkstyle.

The different styles on the mat, though, just mean another opportunity to learn -- which is what the exchange program is all about anyway.

"You make friends, and these kids get an understanding and the difference of our world in the United States and their world which is a far different culture," Bryant said."