

Ripped Apart: Title IX Lawsuit and a Team Divided - the New State of Cleveland Wrestling

BY ZADIE SWINEHART AND ELLIOT FUNK

On March 3, 2025, Cleveland's girls' wrestling team faced significant change and uncertainty after the head coach, Kiera Gabaldon, was fired. She initially announced that she was fired by the program's head coach, Rusty Marchello. This was met with shock from the Cleveland community, as the reasons behind her termination were initially unclear. Marchello later cited the reason as she was not collaborating well with the coaching staff.

The conflict within Cleveland's wrestling program did not end that spring. Gabaldon and five student athletes from the girls' wrestling team filed a 14-page Title IX lawsuit in December against Portland Public Schools and Cleveland High School. It is alleged that the girls' team was not treated equally compared to the boys' team. Title IX is the landmark federal law that prohibits gender-based discrimination in school sports and ensures equal opportunities for male and female athletes.

According to Marchello, there was a district investigation into whether his conduct during the season was inappropriate and that the district cleared him of any wrongdoing. This investigation took place over the spring of 2025, and he claims that the investigation found that allegations of wrongdoing on his behalf were "unsubstantiated."

Marchello is also considering counter-suing for defamation. He argues that these allegations are damaging his day-to-day life and affecting him professionally.

The Clarion interviewed both Marchello and Gabaldon. Marchello's interview took place over email, and he vehemently denied these accusations and said, "I am deeply concerned by the misinformation and false allegations circulating in our community regarding me and our wrestling program."

When answering questions, Marchello made it clear that he was speaking to this issue in his personal capacity, and not on behalf of the district. Additionally, Marchello added, "What began as an internal staffing matter has unfortunately escalated into a public narrative that does not reflect the facts and has caused unnecessary division within the program."

Currently, girls' wrestling is the fastest-growing sport in the United States, with many, including Gabaldon, citing it as the reason that boys' wrestling has also increased in popularity. The sport had previously been in decline, but with new popularity in girls' wrestling, boys' wrestling

received more attention and funding as well.

Gabaldon pursued this lawsuit after her firing in the spring of 2025. She shared her side of the story initially in a social media post: "I was fired this morning by Rusty Marchello after a brief phone call... because I wouldn't 'collaborate' with the coaches." Marchello rebutted this claim, saying this is false, because he does not have "hiring and firing authority."

Gabaldon disputed the statement and said, "He absolutely did have hiring and firing authority, because when he called me over the two-minute phone call, literally a year ago on March 3, he said that they were going to go in a different direction with the women's head coach."

The lawsuit states that the girls' team was often relegated to the cafeteria for practice and not allowed to use the gym, and there were significant disparities in terms of equipment and funding. The lawsuit also claims that Marchello made sexually charged remarks at female athletes. Despite not being a defendant, Marchello is explicitly named in the lawsuit, which has yet to be adjudicated. The lawsuit seeks to remove Marchello from coaching the program and reinstate Gabaldon to her position as the girls' coach. The lawsuit, according to Gabaldon, is about "equality, just getting the girls what they deserve."

This dramatic split can be seen throughout this year's wrestling season. While the boys continued to practice at Cleveland under Marchello, the majority of female wrestlers from the previous season went with Gabaldon to the Big Dawgs Mat Club and are no longer wrestling for Cleveland. Gabaldon has since had to pay out of her pocket for materials for her athletes and described the situation as "the last resort," and something that "no one wanted."

The Big Dawgs Mat Club is not sanctioned as a high school team, causing numerous difficulties for the team. Competing at a club level compared to a high school level also creates many more barriers for athletes, such as transportation, monetary difficulties, and logistics.

They have also been forced to attend meets in Washington, while transportation is completely up to the student due to not having a team bus. Additionally, they've had to wrestle across a wide range of abilities, from less skilled teams to college-aged competitors.

"I would say

Former CHS Coach Gabaldon. Elliot Simpson Photo.

"HE'S (MARCHELLO) PROVEN FOR YEARS HE DOESN'T RESPECT OUR TEAM, AND LIKELY WOMEN AS ATHLETES."

- MARIA CAUDILLO, FORMER CLEVELAND WRESTLER

it was a good learning experience, but that one was a little bit above our level," said Maria Caudillo, referring to wrestling older and more skilled competition. She added, "We're just high schoolers who want to wrestle high schoolers."

Lilly Love and Caudillo, two of the wrestlers who joined Gabaldon in the lawsuit, spoke to the importance this case has to them. Both commented on perceived negligence last year that they believe created an environment in which the girls felt less respected and valued than the boys' team.

"That is what brought about this lawsuit, because the administration at Cleveland wasn't willing to address our concerns as female athletes, which we all feel is because we're women in that male-dominated sport," said Caudillo. "So out of solidarity and our respect for each other as women, we feel like we should be validated in that space."

Gabaldon described the conditions for girls' wrestling last year in stark terms. According to her, Marchello was not able to tell female athletes apart, and he would not attend their competitions. This claim was backed up by other former wrestlers, who added that co-ed practices were heavily catered to the male athletes and what they needed to work on, and these practices frequently sidelined female athletes.

"He's proven for years that he doesn't respect our team and likely doesn't respect women as athletes," said Caudillo.

The female wrestlers have also discussed how they were forced to attend the boys' meets, even when they often didn't have matches, instead of practices that could be utilized to improve their skills.

"They didn't go to any of our meets. I think Coach Marchello was trying to get them to but Coach Kiki had different plans, and I understand that," said Soren Hidebrand-Faust, a current wrestler on the boys' team.

According to female wrestlers who competed last season, both teams attended the Oregon Classic in Redmond, Oregon. Allegedly, during this trip, several girl wrestlers were in the hot tub when Marchello approached them.

"I got out when he started to get in, because I thought it was really weird," said Caudillo.

The lawsuit also claims that the girls' team practiced in insufficient spaces such as the cafeteria and portables. The portable has two small rooms on the outside of the building. The rooms are intended to be classrooms for classes on the smaller side, such as IB Spanish classes.

"The portable rooms were not adequate for practices; we would often run into the walls, and it would become super hot. It was also very tiny," said former Cleveland wrestler Natalie Benn, a junior.



“My focus has always been, and remains, on the well-being, safety, and development of every student in our wrestling program.” - Rustin Marchello

“Their practice was either after hours or they would practice in their own wrestling room in the portable,” said Atticus Lenox, a current wrestler for Cleveland.

Additionally, Gabaldon also spoke to the discrimination embedded in the system. According to her, the varsity girls’ wrestling coach falls under the authority of the boys’ varsity wrestling coach, a standard that is present only in wrestling and track. This is despite the fact that girls’ wrestling is sanctioned as its own sport, completely separate from boys’ wrestling. This essentially relegates the girls’ coach to an employee of the boys’ head coach.

Since the split, the female wrestlers noted that they felt their skills had improved greatly over this season. With more specific attention from Gabaldon, the athletes have been able to practice in ways that help them to gain knowledge and ability. They’ve also appreciated clear feedback from Gabaldon that has helped to specify their areas of improvement.

There is now only one female wrestler who has continued to compete for Cleveland, Amanda Gonzales. This is the second year Gonzales has been on the team; however, last year she was kicked off the girls’ wrestling team due to conflict with the girls’ coach, Gabaldon, and other teammates. She claimed she felt more comfortable with Marchello as a coach and male wrestlers at the time, saying, “I didn’t feel safe with her (Gabaldon).” She later added that she frequently felt excluded from the girls’ team at the time, such as not being included in the team group chat.

Gabaldon, when asked about Gonzales, said that the decision to kick her off the team was made jointly with Marchello. She claimed that Gonzales did not participate in practices and was not meeting the requirements to be on the team, a viewpoint held by many of her fellow teammates. Gonzales refuted this claim, saying that she consistently put in effort but struggled because it was her first year of wrestling. She also said she received very little coaching from Gabaldon and that Gabaldon did not

respect her as much as the other girl athletes.

Multiple boys on the wrestling team commented on the absence of the girls this season. “We have no girls’ team anymore, though, so that’s caused a more empty room,” said Lenox.

Multiple male athletes also praised Marchello, saying they felt they had improved significantly this season, and that Marchello has made a big effort to help them with things they need to improve on. They also say he has made more of an effort to be “everyone’s coach,” going to JV games and giving all athletes feedback.

In terms of the boys’ wrestling team, Marchello said things have been challenging; however, things will continue as normal for now. According to current wrestlers for the Cleveland team, the lawsuit did not significantly affect practices or the quality of coaching that they received.

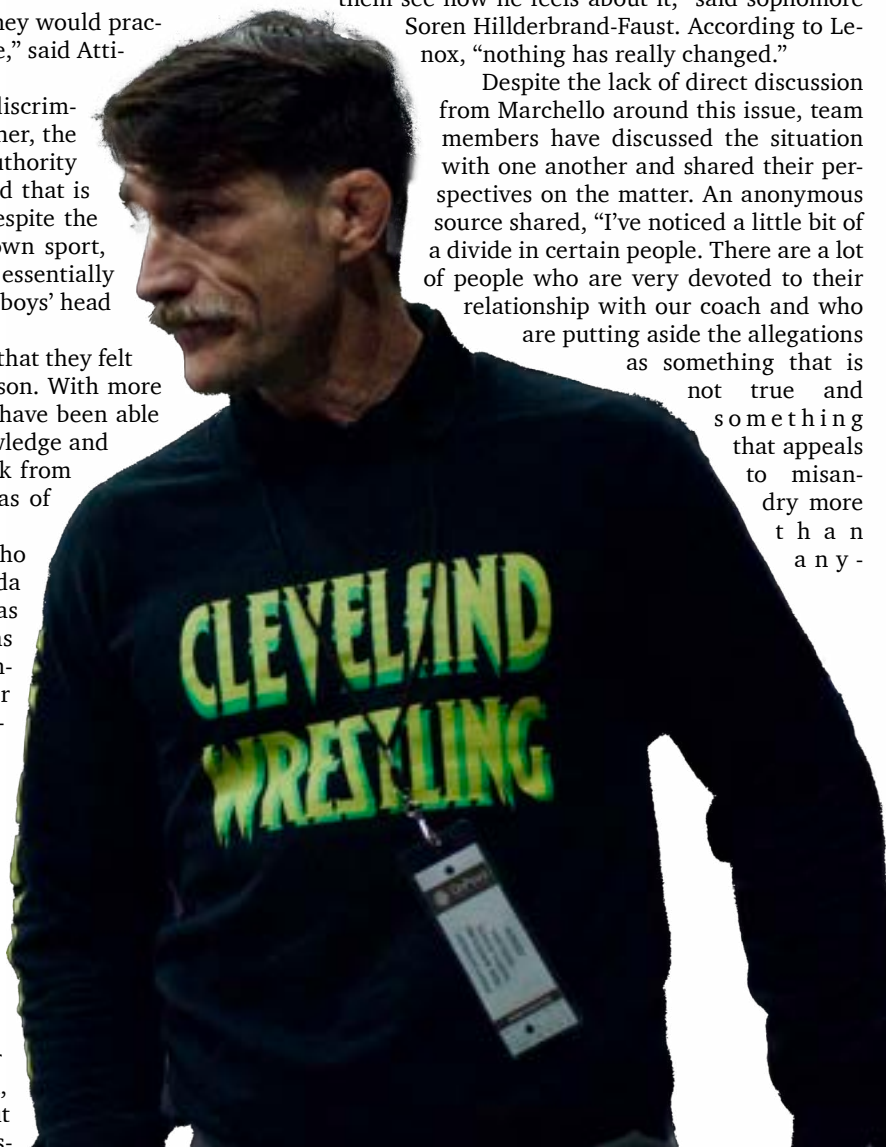
“I think he tries to keep the kids out of it, and he doesn’t let them see how he feels about it,” said sophomore Soren Hilderbrand-Faust. According to Lenox, “nothing has really changed.”

Despite the lack of direct discussion from Marchello around this issue, team members have discussed the situation with one another and shared their perspectives on the matter. An anonymous source shared, “I’ve noticed a little bit of a divide in certain people. There are a lot of people who are very devoted to their relationship with our coach and who are putting aside the allegations

as something that is not true and something that appeals to misandry more than any-



Former Cleveland wrestler competing through the Big Dawgs Mat Club for a wrestling tournament. Photo from Lily Love.



Rustin Marchello, Cleveland boys head wrestling coach, standing at the state tournament. Elliot Weir photo.

thing. But there’s also a group of people who are on the other side of that who don’t feel very inclined to speak much about it.”

Some wrestlers have chosen to remove themselves completely from the issue, so as not to damage their relationship with the coaches or interfere with their wrestling season.

“I don’t know the full story or information about it, nor do I really want to, because the information could vary on the coach, or the perspective of the coach,” said Robert Perry, a freshman wrestler.

In his interview, Marchello emphasized the importance of separating the lawsuit from his coaching. “I continue to teach and coach with professionalism and care. I remain committed to my students,” he said.

Marchello has been coaching for more than 20 years and has dedicated his life to this passion. “Coaching has given me perspective, humility, and purpose. It reinforces that growth comes through perseverance, accountability, and mutual respect,” he said.

To the female wrestlers who are currently competing in a club team under Gabaldon, Marchello said, “I want them to know that they are valued, respected, and always welcome in our program. Wrestling is their time to grow, to compete, and to build confidence. I hope they do not feel that circumstances beyond their control should prevent them from continuing their journey.”

The future of Marchello and Gabaldon’s careers, and the trajectory of girls’ wrestling at Cleveland, remains unclear. Whether girls’ wrestling will continue to be a program under boys wrestling or if it will become its own sport, completely separate from the boys team, may be the determining factor if the girls’ team can rebuild itself under Marchello and new coaches, or if it will continue to center on Gabaldon.

According to Gabaldon, the lawsuit is just beginning, with the court dates being settled this April. Going forward, both coaches are unsure what things are going to look like. Marchello said he wants to create a program in which athletes feel empowered to pursue wrestling without “fear or distraction.”

Gabaldon added, “If he’s still there as the head coach, we would need a completely separate program. If he were not the head coach there anymore, and I did come back to Cleveland, I would be fine working with another male head coach.”