

Heart of a Tiger: FHSU Tiger Women's Wrestlers step into the spotlight

3/26/26

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - In the wrestling room at Fort Hays State University, the focus is on the hard work and repetition required to build a brand-new program from the ground up. For the seventeen women who put on the Tiger singlet for the first time in the 2023-24 season, every practice was a step toward establishing a foundation that didn't exist just a few years ago.

When FHSU announced the addition of women's wrestling as the school's 17th varsity sport in late 2022, it was a move that placed the university at the forefront of a national movement. As the first NCAA school in Kansas and the first in the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) to sponsor the sport, FHSU wasn't just adding a program—it was answering a call from one of the fastest-growing high school sports in the nation.

Fast forward to March 2026, the Tigers aren't just participating; they are contending. Ranked No. 14 in the nation, as four student-athletes headed into the National Championships in Coralville, Iowa, the program has transitioned from a "new addition" to a competing on the national stage in record time.

The rapid ascent of Tiger women's wrestling can be traced back to the hiring of Head Coach Alijah Jeffery. Arriving from Chadron State, Coach Jeffery saw more than just a job opening at Fort Hays State; he saw a community ready to embrace the grit of women's wrestling.

"I coached some wrestlers from Kansas previously, and they suggested I check out Fort Hays," Jeffery recalls. "The first day I got here, my wife and I found the community and the administration so welcoming. The facilities were top-notch; the campus was beautiful—I was sold from day one."

Coach Jeffery's task was monumental: build a team culture from scratch. He didn't just look for talent; he looked for pathfinders. "We tried to build our team culture around well-rounded individuals—student-athletes who have good character and are focused on getting better every day," he says. "We looked for unselfishness and gratitude."

If Jeffery is the architect, sophomore Isabella Renfro is the cornerstone. A two-time Missouri state champion who went 47-0 during her final two years of high school, Renfro chose FHSU because of a gut feeling.

"I met Coach Jeffery at the National Duals competition when I was in high school," Isabella said. "I thought he knew what he was talking about. The way he talked about his program and what he saw in me just made me feel on board with his vision."

That decision paid dividends for the Tigers. Isabella, a 180-pound powerhouse from Seneca, Mo., etched her name into the record books this March by becoming FHSU's first-ever NCAA All-American in women's wrestling. Entering the national tournament as the No. 3 seed with a

29-3 record and ranked No. 1 in the nation at one point in the season, she battled through a grueling bracket to finish fourth in the nation.

Isabella's impact isn't just on the scoreboard; she logged the "fastest pin" team record of 15 seconds during her 2024-2025 freshman season, setting a standard of aggressiveness and technical prowess for the younger wrestlers to follow.

While Isabella represents the program's elite ceiling, the heart of the team is found in its collective "we-over-me" mentality. Freshman Leiannah Landreth, who entered the national tournament as the No. 8 seed at 117 pounds, chose FHSU because of the bond she felt with her teammates.

"A lot of our focus has been on building this team, maybe sometimes not looking at your own individual goals, but looking at what's best for the group," Leiannah explains. "There are a lot of selfless people on our team who would do anything for the other girls."

This culture of support was tested during the journey to the National Championships this spring. For sophomore Alexis Burton, a Hays native, the season was a whirlwind of growth. "Two months before nationals, I was wrestling at 145 pounds," Alexis says. "Then I bumped up to 160 and had a lot of success. From where I started, it seemed crazy that I had made it all the way to the national championships."

When the team arrived in Coralville the first week in March, the scale of what they had built became clear. "We didn't expect to compete in front of huge crowds, but that's what happened," Alexis says. "Even though they weren't our home crowd, it was amazing to see so many people there who were obviously passionate about wrestling."

Perhaps no one embodies the program's mission better than Nichole Moore. A graduate student from Abbeyville, Kan., Nichole's journey to FHSU was a winding one, involving stops at Baker University and McKendree University. A former All-American, Moore was looking for a place to finish her eligibility that felt like home.

"I wanted to be closer to my family and with coaches I respected," Nichole says. "I liked Coach Jeffery because I had coached with him. I really got to see the perspective of him as a coach from another coach's perspective, and I liked what I saw."

Nichole has become a mentor for the younger Tigers. At 145 pounds, she finished the year with an 18-7 record, but her value transcends her wins. "We brought Nicole in because she's the whole package," Jeffery says. "She embodies the culture we are building here. She's a leader, a fierce competitor, and she has a unique ability to approach the sport from a coach's perspective."

For Nichole, the stakes are higher than a podium finish. She remembers a time before girls' wrestling was an officially sanctioned high school sport in Kansas.

"The opportunities have exploded," Nichole says. "For me, it's about being a role model to all these little girls I coach who keep up with me on Facebook and watch us on the live streams. When I step on the mat, I'm giving back to the sport."

The rise of the FHSU program mirrors a national trend. Since 1994, the number of women wrestling in high school has skyrocketed from 804 to over 74,000. In Kansas alone, there are now more than 1,400 high school participants.

"For so long, it was an opportunity only available to boys," Jeffery says. "But women have a knack for this kind of competition. They bring so much passion. It was just a matter of time before it exploded."

With a record-setting 2025-26 season now in the books, the Tigers are no longer just a "new sport" on campus. They are a program of national significance—having entered the season with a No. 7 NWCA preseason ranking—and a source of immense pride for the Hays community.

With leaders like Isabella returning, veterans like Nichole passing the torch, and coaching staff committed to character, teamwork, and gratitude, the future of FHSU Women's Wrestling isn't just bright; it's gold.