

NO "I" IN

TEAM



HE WIPES THE SWEAT FROM BENEATH HIS WESLEYAN GOLF HAT, AND THEN HE CLIMBS THE HILL UP TO THE 18TH GREEN ALONE.

LEGS STRETCHING OUT INTO HER LONGEST STRIDE, SHE FLINGS HER HEAD TOWARDS THE FINISH LINE.

HIS LUNGS ACHE AS HIS FINGERTIPS STRETCH FOR THE BLACK-AND-WHITE TILED WALL.

SHE LETS OUT A QUICK SQUEAL WHEN HER ACE SNEAKS JUST INSIDE THE LINES ON THE FINAL SERVE.

A GRIN BEGINS TO TICKLE THE CORNERS OF HIS MOUTH AS THE REF GRABS HIS HAND TO SIGNAL VICTORY.

These scenes of solo triumph each end the same way: the celebratory mosh pit turns into a dog pile that reminds participants, coaches, and spectators that there really is no "I" in team.

Of the 23 sports that Wesleyan offers, 11 team titles are awarded based on an aggregate team score made up of points earned in individual events or competitions. In cross country, swimming and diving, wrestling, golf, tennis, and track and field, an individual's performance plays a tangible role in the team's results.

A few points earned in that event, one less stroke on the golf course, or a key victory in the tennis lineup can be the difference between a championship celebration and a teary runner-up hug.

Why is it, then, that the championship dog pile is the lasting memory and not the time flashing on the clock when the race is finished or the number on the score card when the match is complete? Because there really is no "I" in team, and that reality has always been at the heart of Wesleyan athletics.

"In all our sports programs, our coaches intentionally and creatively build team cultures that emphasize the importance of being a part of something bigger than yourself," says **LACY GILBERT, director of athletics**.



STARTING STRONG

Teams can establish the "bigger than yourself" part of athletics weeks and even months before competition begins, and often this bonding has very little to do with the sport itself. For example, the swimming and diving team celebrates an annual "spooky practice" just a few weeks into the season and also a few days before Halloween.

After a tough practice with pool lights flickering off at strategic intervals and spooky tunes blasting through the speakers, swimmers and divers then enjoy pizza, candy, and fellowship.

"'Spooky practice' was born out of a surprise power outage a few years ago that left us practicing with the lights out," recalls **KEVIN KADZIS, high school boys grade chair and swimming and diving coach**.

Kadzis continues to say that "the surprise power outage became a unifying experience that helped bond that year's team together, and even though we plan the lights going out now, the goal is still to create an opportunity for our team to connect."

"Swimming and diving is unique because during much of our practice time together, we cannot even talk since the athletes' faces are in the water," Kadzis explains. "Building a cohesive team where everyone roots for one another's success is really important, but easily overlooked. We cannot let the urgent get in the way of the important."

For the past five years, **ANDY FREE, high school math teacher and boys golf coach**, sets the tone for the season by holding a "Wesleyan Ryder Cup" to kick off the season. Varsity and JV boys golfers are divided evenly into two teams that compete for several weeks on different courses in various golf formats that range from two-man best ball to individual match play.

"When we mix up players like that, the players are forced to think more in teams and less as individuals or buddies," explains Free. "They are used to thinking about their own round, but the 'Wesleyan Ryder Cup' gives them an early-season opportunity to consider how to encourage and uplift one another. Plus, combining the varsity and JV teams reminds everyone that they are a part of a golf program."

NOT A ONE-AND-DONE

Establishing program culture and unity is not a one-and-done priority, and most teams undergo some fine-tuning and maintenance throughout the season. "Team building is something I am always thinking about," says **JOSH TOLMAN '10, high school Bible teacher and wrestling coach**.

To help maintain a sense of belonging on the wrestling team, Tolman recently piloted a new wrestling tradition by dividing JV and varsity wrestlers into smaller, student-led teams. In a season-long competition, the intrasquad teams earn points for meet performance and compete for "hustle points" by going above and beyond team expectations. Rallying from behind in a match, volunteering to carry the cooler, or emptying the trash may earn a "hustle point," but the most highly sought after "hustle point" is the one awarded to the winner of the weekly handball tournament.

Why should a wrestling team play handball? "Because it's fun," smiles Tolman. "Because it is one of the antidotes to the possible monotony of practice and long weekend meets. Because we get to be competitive without the stress of a match. Because it offers a more tangible opportunity to see that we are all working toward the same goal."



Similar to the mixed up "Wesleyan Ryder Cup" teams, the season-long intrasquad wrestling competition opens doors to create or strengthen bonds between teammates, and it infuses team unity into the regular cadence of the season.



MAKE IT LAST

The daily – and sometimes grinding – cadence of practices and workouts can sometimes distract from the more lasting significance of being a part of a program; however, enduring the practices and workouts together produces a solidarity that magnifies the importance of team.

Every November since the mid-2000s, dozens of alumni who participated in cross country write letters to the current teams about the lasting significance of belonging to the cross country program. On the night before the state meet, the letters are read aloud when nervous jitters may be at an all-time high.

Regardless of how recently the alumni graduated, some common themes emerge in their letters: 2k repeats in August heat are grueling; competing for your teammates is more motivating than racing for your own personal best; and the reward for giving your fullest effort and then a little more is lasting.

“The letters often articulate the intersection of mind, body, and spirit,” describes **CHRIS YODER, director of studies and cross country coach**. “The alumni help the current team to identify all the small steps they have bought into and how that commitment has led to their success. They remind the current team that it is not about one moment. It’s about one thousand moments.”

On the eve of the most exciting meet of the year, the alumni letters redirect the focus from an individual performance to a bigger and greater picture of team.

While that greater picture of team cannot be fully captured in a magazine article or a framed photo, some images do have the power to quickly resurrect a special memory. In a simple black frame sitting right next to Kadzis' monitor on his desk is one of those powerful photos – the 2023 boys and girls swim and dive state champions celebrating their victory with a whole team jump into the pool – including fully clothed coaches Kevin Kadzis and Susan Brooks.

"It is the aquatic version of dumping Gatorade on the coach or a giant dog pile," smiles Kadzis. "And the privilege is reserved for champions. Each year, we celebrate the individual swimmers and divers who have a great day at the state meet – and deservedly so! – but those celebrations pale in comparison to the excitement of jumping into the pool as a team. That jump is the culmination of months, even years, of hard work done together."

Whether a team jump into the pool, a Gatorade bath for the coach, or a celebratory dog pile, the culminating moments connect individuals into a story bigger than that one day. Like most stories, that bigger story of athletics ebbs and flows between effort and ease, focus and fun, serious and silly, and sometimes it is the silly traditions that give current participants an experience that overlaps with past team members.

For more than a decade, the track and field state meet team has taken the childlike joy of watching a stick float down a river to a new level. The annual "stick race" during the weekend of the state meet is a beloved tradition in which members of the state team carefully select a stick from their yard, assessing the density and hydrodynamics. Each team member's stick is measured (sticks must be less than 18 inches) and placed in a special box before they board the bus on state meet departure day.





With extravagant fanfare and play-by-play commentary by either **CANDLER BAXLEY, middle school social sciences teacher and track and field coach** or **CHAD MCDANIEL, director of development and cross country coach**, the sticks drift from the drop zone, which is usually a bridge, to the designated finish line. The rules are simple: first stick to cross the finish lines wins.

"The stick race was actually the idea of Chip Myrick, discus and shotput coach extraordinaire. We added it when he joined our coaching staff, and everybody loved it," explains Baxley. "At the state track meet, we try to keep the mood as light as possible and have as much fun as possible. We already had several traditions and competitions, and the stick race was a perfect addition."

"Looking back, the stick race kind of symbolizes one of our goals for track and field – to create shared experiences that help unify our team," reflects Baxley.

Yoder, who also coaches track and field, agrees that creating team unity helps with both short-term and long-term goals. "When you focus on team building, you get both a competitive advantage and character development. Competitively, you get way more out of each individual if they are training and competing for their teammates," explains Yoder. "More importantly, though, subscribing to a team-focus over an I-focus prepares them to lean on community when facing future (and unknown) challenges that require grit, effort, and perseverance. And we learn that best by practicing it together."

By "practicing it together," every individual involved in Wesleyan athletics has the opportunity to be motivated, uplifted, and encouraged by belonging to a team. Whether on the course, mat, pool, court, or track, participants are practicing the daily life skills of commitment and working together toward a common goal, and these skills have lasting value because no matter where you go, there is no "I" in team. ■