

Maine East's Lizeth Torres paves the way for female wrestlers



Maine East senior wrestler Lizeth Torres, left, finished second at 106 pounds at the Illinois Wrestling Coaches & Officials Association's first girls state tournament in mid March. (Emiliano Hernandez / HANDOUT)

By **Heather Rule**
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Lizeth Torres plays on the girls soccer team at Maine East. She's also a wrestler — with the Blue Demons boys team.

Her cousin wanted to join the wrestling team when they were both freshmen, and she wanted Torres to join, too.

"I ended up liking it," Torres said.

Now a senior, she's found plenty of success in the male-dominated sport, paving the way for other female wrestlers. She's a two-time varsity letter winner and a team captain this year, becoming the first female team captain of a boys sport in school history, according to Maine East wrestling coach Emiliano Hernandez.

In her 106-pound weight class, she took second at the Illinois Wrestling Coaches & Officials Association's first girls state tournament, which was March 11 and 12 in Springfield.

Her freshman teammate Kate Cacho took fourth at state in the 101-pound weight class. Cacho and Torres were among six Maine East wrestlers to compete at state.

The state tournament was girls versus girls, but during the season, the Maine East girls wrestled against boys. Maine East had seven girls on the team this year; the most Hernandez had previously was one or two at a time.

Torres barely missed a workout in her four years on the team. She also worked through injuries, showing her competitiveness.

"She wouldn't back off," Hernandez said. "She would just keep pushing. You'd have to yank her out of practice to keep her out of there."

Torres had a strong junior season wrestling at the JV and varsity levels, but didn't have quite the same success this year wrestling for the varsity team because "all the boys started knowing about her," Hernandez said. Opponents said things like, "You can't take her lightly," and "She's good," according to Hernandez.

Torres' success can be traced to a lot of hard work, sharp technique and a "pit-bull mentality," Hernandez said.

"I had to work harder because the guys have natural strength, and for girls we need to work really, really hard to get to that point," said Torres, a Des Plaines resident.

She was the lone girl on the team her sophomore and junior seasons. She didn't wrestle another girl until about midway through her junior season.

Being a wrestling veteran with six freshman teammates this year, Torres was an instant role model. She took the lead on making sure the girls knew what to wear (singlets, just like the boys, except also with an Under Armour shirt), taught them technique and helped them with any personal problems so they could maintain their focus on wrestling.

"What I like about it is that they see me as their role model, and I try to be the best role model that I could possibly be," Torres said.

Torres also had a positive influence on her male teammates, according to Hernandez. Before she joined the team, Hernandez and the other coaches had to remind wrestlers to watch their language in practice. Torres doesn't curse, and Hernandez said the boys on the team have followed her lead and watch their language around her.

Hernandez sees a growing future for girls wrestling. He and Torres noticed more girls at meets throughout this past season.

Torres encourages other girls to try something new, like she did, and give wrestling a chance. Next year, her younger sister is planning to join the wrestling ranks as a freshman. Torres said she isn't sure if she's going to wrestle in college. If she doesn't, she said she'd like to return to Maine East and assist next season's wrestlers.

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