

Titans' wrestling coach teaches with a purpose

By Brad Hartmann
HERALD CONTRIBUTOR

There is a purpose and a reason why Efrain Ayala is coach of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh wrestling program in that he believes is his faith.

"God has put me here to help these young men and help prepare them for life," said Ayala. "I treat this job as I am making a million dollars every day. You got to come in here and grind. You have to work hard and know there is a purpose."

Ayala's dream of coaching wrestling came true Aug. 12, 2013, when he was named the Titans 12th coach since 1967, replacing Chris Stratton who resigned for

personal reasons.

"I always knew wrestling would be in his future somewhere," said Kurt Frohling, his high school wrestling coach at Grand Island Senior High in Nebraska. "I thought he would be a high school coach. He just loved the sport of wrestling. I am just so glad that he was able to move up the ranks to become a college coach, which is quite unique."



Ayala

Ayala may have the luxury of being named without any prior head coaching



PHOTO BY UW-OSHKOSH

UW-Oshkosh wrestling head coach Efrain Ayala encourages one of his wrestlers during a recent match. His team is currently 6-5 overall and 2-2 in conference.

experience but one thing that stands out is his ability to pick people's brains such as Frohling and college coaches Mark Manning and Bryan Snyder at the University

of Nebraska.

"I think it's his passion and how he can

SEE **Wrestling coach** ON PAGE 11

JANUARY 23, 2019

OSHKOSHHERALD.COM | PAGE 11

Wrestling coach

FROM PAGE 1

relate to people. Coach Ayala is really good at the ability to adapt and if someone is struggling with something he can work with you whether it's inside or outside of the wrestling room," said Titans senior wrestler Dellas Vandenberg (149 lbs.) "Every day you come in and you never know what to expect from him. He brings great energy even on our bad days."

Most people would compare coach Ayala to the energizer bunny as he is known for his high level of excitement while cheering on his wrestlers.

"He gets so into it like he is out there with the guys. You can't miss his facial expressions," said sister Bianca Ayala. "You can hear him coaching the guys throughout the match. He's not a screamer but he will get your attention by saying things like, 'Come on guys, let's get going' or, 'You got 10 seconds, you better do something about it.'"

Ayala was introduced to wrestling at age 5 by a friend and decided to give it a try with some mixed emotions.

"I wanted to quit after a few meets, but that's not in my blood. My dad wouldn't let me quit anything. I tried one more meet and ended up winning it and after that it was almost like a snowball effect," said Ayala.

Ayala was born in Gering, Neb., later moved to Colorado and then returned to Nebraska to finish middle and high school in Grand Island as he excelled in wrestling, football and his dad's favorite sport, track.

"He did everything that I asked him to do. He was a great kid to coach. He did the extra stuff such as running after practice," said Frohling. "His quickness was his advantage. He had this heel kick that was

devastating to his opponents that they just couldn't stop. He had a great single leg. We worked on his takedowns with him and he became a takedown machine."

Ayala is the Islanders' all-time takedown leader at 481 and on Feb. 8, 2003, he broke John Morrow's all-time school record of 117 wins set in 1993. After completing his sophomore season Ayala met Morrow at a wedding. Frohling introduced the wrestlers by jokingly telling Ayala he stood little chance on the mat against Morrow.

"I told him I was going to get a few of his records," said Ayala. "He said go for it. That's what they're there for — to break."

On the mat Ayala was a stud. He was a four-year letter winner with a 127-25 record. He finished his senior season with an astonishing 36-2 mark, which earned him a No.1 ranking in Class A at 135, topping off his last match with a state championship by defeating Fremont junior Brandon Kruger 7-4 in 2003.

"He didn't stop smiling. He really took in the support from our community," Bianca recalled. "The next day we got pictures taken together for other businesses posters and that's when he realized there was a lot of support for him."

Ayala wasn't a stranger to the state tournament. In 2001 he was runner-up at 119 and placed third the following year at 125 after being upset in the semifinals.

"His sophomore year he went into the finals with a two-time state champ going for three. I don't think he was prepared because of the intensity of it," said Frohling. "His junior year he lost to a kid that he beat before on a funky move that he pulled on him. I thought his senior year his focus was tremendous. Going into his sophomore year the only finishing move Efrain relied on was the heel kick."

"Then he focused on the single leg, duck under and a pass. He could take you down

in so many ways. People were scared of him on his feet."

Ayala will be inducted into the Grand Island Senior High Athletic Hall of Fame next month in the second annual class.

"It was an easy choice. He was a tremendous wrestler," said athletics and activities director Cindy Wells. "He was a leader inside the classroom and as a wrestler. It was his character; he walked the walk."

In Ayala's sixth season as Titans coach he has guided them to a 24-56 overall record and 7-22 in the WIAC conference. In Ayala's first season he was named Rookie Coach of the Year by the National Wrestling Coaches Association as the Titans placed 10th at the 2014 NCAA Division III Championship. Ayala also helped Nazar Kulchitsky (142-5, 67 pins) to three straight national titles.

"My senior year in college our goal was to be top 10 in the country," said Kulchitsky. "I didn't know anything about team scoring. Right before my match he told me focus on myself. He didn't tell me that if I got a tech fall or pin we would accomplish that. He knew he could trust me and that says a lot to me that he puts his trust in his athletes."

Ayala's wrestlers enjoy his ability to adapt and make them feel comfortable.

"We were on our Las Vegas trip. We needed to get a workout in. Coach Ayala pulls over and we started jogging in the road. I don't think most coaches, especially in the D 3 level, would do that," said senior Mark Choinski (165 lbs.).

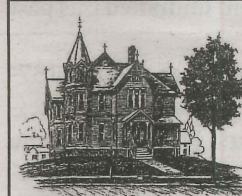
"We were in New Mexico at the time. It was around sunset and we ended up running in a parade that was going on, which was pretty cool because it wasn't planned at all. The people in the crowd were actually cheering us on and made us feel welcomed."

One of the hardest things in life to deal with is the death of a sibling. In 2012 Aya-

la's youngest sister Gabby took her own life at age 21. Each year Efrain and Bianca remember their sister with a 5K run called Glow 4 Gabby with all proceeds going to scholarships for graduating GISH seniors. This year's run will be June 15.

"Absolutely she was an inspiration to me. She was an amazing young lady. She had a lot to deal with at that time," Ayala said. "I wished I could have reached out more and talked to her more about it and picked her brain. You always do the woulda, shoulda, couldas. My middle sister, she has now designated her time to suicide awareness to make sure this doesn't happen again so that everyone gets the right help."

Back in the Day



Oshkosh history
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Jan. 18, 1929

Watercolors by Oshkosh artist hung at capital: Two watercolors by local artist Nile J. Behncke are on display this month in the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. 178 prints by 86 artists are on display. Behncke is the only one representing Wisconsin. One of the pictures is titled "The Yellow Tree," the other "St. Mary's of the Pines." Mr. Behncke's watercolor paintings have received widespread recognition both nationally and internationally. Nile is the son of Gustav Behncke, who was also a noted artist, oil painter and church decorator in Wisconsin.

Source: Oshkosh Daily Northwestern, Jan. 18, 1929