

# SPECIAL Report

*"You have that chance to be the underdog and build your way up to the top before you get thrown in to the senior national scene where you're basically with the adults of the wrestling world."* — LEAH CALLAHAN



PHOTO BY MONIQUE SMITH

**Leah Callahan takes down longtime rival, and 10-time defending national champion, Ohenewa Akuffo of Ontario, at the Canadian Wrestling Olympic Trials in Winnipeg last December. The victory earned Callahan a spot on the Canadian Olympic team.**

## Mackenzie wrestler fulfills Olympic dream

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**L**eah Callahan's road to the Summer Olympics began on the snowy highways of British Columbia when she was a fledgling teenaged wrestler in Mackenzie.

"We probably drove half this province just getting her to tournaments and competitions," said Louie Van Grootel, who coached Callahan when she was in Grade 11 and 12 at Mackenzie secondary school. "Even at that age you knew she had a lot of potential and the work ethic to go far in the sport. Leah has unbelievable strength and power and explosiveness."

Callahan went from potential Olympian to fulfilling her dream officially on March 24 when she qualified at an international tournament in Orlando for the 2012 Summer Olympic games in London from July 27 to Aug. 12. But the 24 year old began planning her British adventure after earning her place on the Canadian Olympic women's team at the Canadian Trials in December.

"When I qualified in December it was very exciting and then the international qualification was just another step," said Callahan, explaining that in order to send a team to the Olympics a country needs to be ranked in the Top 18 in the world. "It feels good to finally say, 'I'm going for sure' and to start focusing on all the opponents I'm going to meet and really get a solid game plan."

Callahan is the third women from northern B.C. to secure spot on the Canadian women's freestyle wrestling team for the Olympics since the sport was added to the summer games in 2004. In Athens, Lyndsay Belisle of Hazelton finished 11th in the flyweight division, while four years ago in Beijing another Hazelton wrestler, Carol Huynh, won gold in the

48-kilogram division. Huynh will have the opportunity to defend her gold medal in London.

For Callahan having an experienced Olympian to train with at the national training centre in Calgary makes the experience more fun since they've become good friends and have travelled together over the past four years.

"The only advice she gave me was that we're all in the same boat going there and it's going to be the same journey and not to put any of the girls on a pedestal," said Callahan. "Just know we're all part of the same team with the same chances to medal."

Of the four weight classes for women, Callahan competes in the 72-kilogram class – the highest weight class – which will have about 18 women battling for gold, so the potential is she will have four or five matches in London to win gold.

And, that's precisely what Callahan plans to do.

"To win for sure," she said. "We're definitely aiming for the podium."

### Humble beginnings

It was Ken Barwise who planted the first seeds in Callahan to push herself to work towards the Olympics when he implemented a wrestling program in Mackenzie when she was in Grade 8.

At the time, Barwise, a physical education teacher in Mackenzie, was new to the sport, and reached out for help from Van Grootel in Prince George to teach the two students who signed up – Callahan and Nathan Bodewitz.

Van Grootel, who took over the program briefly when Barwise took a leave to receive more technical wrestling training, remembered Callahan as a determined competitor who set small goals for herself.

"[The Olympics] was probably a discussion here and there, but I think she was kind of more

focused on shorter-term goals – like winning provincials which she did," said Van Grootel, adding she ended up placing second at nationals that year as well.

"With Leah it was always a steady progression," he continued. "There wasn't all this huge initial success. She had some success and continued to progress to where she is. I think the thing that really drove her was the fact she didn't win at all the first time out [in Grade 11]."

The slow, steady approach Callahan exhibited in high school is what Van Grootel points to as the reason he believes she decided not to tryout for the Canadian Olympic team in 2008.

"I think at that time she decided that to win it wasn't a very realistic goal," said Van Grootel.

Callahan was also a student at the University of Calgary and a member of the Dinos' wrestling team, which kept her busy. She wrapped up her Canadian Interuniversity Sport career in 2011 with her third consecutive national championship and will graduate this spring with a degree in cultural communications.

"It's one of those stepping stones like high school," said Callahan about her Dinos' experience. "You have that chance to be the underdog and build your way up to the top before you get thrown in to the senior national scene where you're basically with the adults of the wrestling world."

It was after she moved to Calgary when Callahan started to realize making the Olympics wasn't so far-fetched.

"The Olympics was definitely a dream but once I came to university and realized I could be on the national team it became a little bit more of a goal," she said.

In addition to travelling to provincial high-school wrestling tournaments Van Grootel spent a summer with Callahan and Bodewitz travelling in Europe for wrestling events.

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**"We're wrestlers and we train for tournaments all the time. [The Olympics] is just sort of a more focused summer, but nothing out of the norm. We've been doing it for four years."**

— Callahan

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