



FEATURED

# Miller pushes boundaries to make room for women of color in wrestling

By KORI STEWART Circleville Herald Sports Editor Feb 18, 2022 Updated Feb 18, 2022



Ava Miller (middle) with her parents Regina (left) and Leary (right)  
Photo courtesy of the Miller family



ASHVILLE— Last year, Ava Miller made a grown-man cry. After winning her first high school wrestling match, Miller’s mom, Regina, called her middle school wrestling coach to give him the good news.

“He was just this guy from rural Ohio, and he’s crying on the phone and saying ‘I’m just so proud of you.’” Miller recounted in a conversation on Friday.

After winning her first high school match, things have only been getting better and better for Miller, who credits her team and wrestling with growing her confidence.

Miller knew from early on that not everything would be easy for her. At her first elementary school, a private catholic school in central Ohio, Miller remembers being bullied by other students.

“I was bullied a lot. I don’t know why they would pick on me so much. But they would just always try to [exclude] me and stuff like that.”

As a woman of color, Miller is always a minority, in her school and in her town. When she moved to the Teays Valley school district in third grade, that status didn’t change. However, things felt better in Ashville for Miller

“I felt a little like there was less bullying here. Catholic school, it’s like a small group, and then this group was much bigger.”

In that bigger group, Miller found wrestling.

“I got into wrestling because I wanted to be a part of my school.”

Miller was an athlete before she started wrestling in seventh grade, only her sport was outside of school. At 10 years old, Miller began jujitsu and has now progressed to an orange and white belt. She learned from her jujitsu coach that wrestling might help with takedowns, and decided to give it a shot.

High school wrestling is a predominantly white sport in most places, Ohio included, and Miller walked into the wrestling world keenly aware of her perceived disadvantages.

“I feel like sometimes, [the racial makeup] kind of shows how privileged [something is]. Some of these girls, they had the chance, if their dads were wrestlers, or they had big brothers, they had the opportunity to wrestle when they were much younger. I didn’t have that, really.”

Coming into wrestling with no prior knowledge can be difficult, Regina Miller remembers having to pick up on the rules and customs quickly in order to support her daughter’s growing love of the sport.

Miller herself felt added pressure because of her gender, race and knowledge level.

“I had to earn my respect... [people] thought I was just doing it for fun and I would say no, I’m actually serious about it. And they didn’t believe me.”

On the mat, Miller proved herself time and time again.

In her freshman year, she qualified for the state championship, coming out of the toughest district for girls’ wrestling.

Miller’s head coach, Todd Nace, who is in charge of the whole wrestling program at Teays Valley High School, treats all his wrestlers with the same intensity and dedication.

“We just treat her as one of the boys and one of the wrestlers,” Nace said.

However, he does acknowledge that Miller is a rare occurrence for wrestling.

“Sometimes I think she might be isolated, a little bit. We don’t have as much diversity on the team.” Nace said.

Of course Teays Valley, like a lot of places in central Ohio, has grown and changed in different ways recently.

“Our school has become a little more diverse, and I think our school has to learn to be a little different. because we haven’t been [as diverse] in the past. I think we’re moving forward and our students are more accepting than compared to maybe 15, 20 years ago.”

Miller wants to be a part of that change.

“I know there are people who look up to me. And I kind of want to be a trailblazer, but I kind of want to stay humble. I just don’t want to be like ‘oh yeah, I’m the best’ and then get knocked down.”

As for competing, Miller has once again qualified for the state championship, after finishing third out of 13 wrestlers in the 100 weight-class at the southwest districts.

At Hilliard Davidson High School, Miller will first face the second place finisher from the northeast district on her journey to see how far she can go as a sophomore.

“She’s done a great job for us. She’s matured so much this last year and stayed focused, and just learned. She’s been a sponge this year,” Coach Nace said of Miller.

“Last year I think she just kind of thought ‘well I can do this’. And then this year she came in with a purpose.”

At states on Saturday and Sunday, Miller will be supported by coach Nace, as well as her mom and dad.

Miller’s parents didn’t start out with a wrestling background but have put time and energy into supporting their daughter.

Miller credited her mom, Regina, with teaching her a good work ethic. Miller also made a point to mention her father, Learry’s, presence in her life, saying he has been a great father figure even though he didn’t have a good role model growing up.

“He’s been telling me like, ‘these girls aren’t better than you. You can do this’. He’s been really helpful, making sure I have everything, driving me back and forth.”

Miller’s parents feel like the sky’s the limit for their daughter. Regina even spoke to Ohio State University Athletic Director Gene Smith to advocate for starting a women’s wrestling team at the university.

Miller isn’t putting any specific goals out there, only focusing on improving everyday.

“I’m thinking that, if we were to take a video of me last year and then look at a video of me now, I feel like I’ve improved a lot and I want to keep going with that... As far as I can go, I’ll do it.”