

Portage wrestling duo resigning Pendoski to open academy; Tharp to retire from coaching

The tag-team coaching duo of Ed Pendoski and Larry Tharp has forged Portage into one of the state's top wrestling programs during their 11 years together.

Now the pair will be moving on at the same time, too, informing the team of their decision after practice Wednesday.

"There were rumors ever since the first day of practice, but I really didn't believe them," senior Dallas Hesseltine said. "Once they told us, it was a heartbreaker. Even though I'm graduating, it's still kind of tough knowing they're leaving."

Pendoski, the head coach the last seven years, is moving to Indianapolis after the school year to open the Central Indiana Academy of Wrestling, while Tharp will retire from coaching.

"This is as big a decision as I've ever made in my life," said Pendoski, 32. "The timing is really good. There's unlimited potential. Larry Tharp's the biggest influence in helping me learn and grow as a coach. He is definitely different than the average person, but he is the wisest coach I've ever been around. The opportunities I've been given and the unique chances I have ahead of me are because of that."

Tharp, who has been at Portage for 20 years, six as a head coach, will remain as a teacher.

"Twenty years is enough for me," Tharp said. "At the beginning of the year, I said, if (Pendoski) goes, I'm going. We've been together a long time and done a lot of things. I couldn't work with somebody else. We paid our dues. I'm happy with what we've done. We've affected a lot of kids, hopefully in a good way. There's been a lot of good kids, great families and good times."

After the 1998 season, Tharp selflessly stepped aside to allow Pendoski to be the head coach.

"Believe it or not, he's been the bad guy at times and I've been the good guy," Tharp said. "We were like brothers at times. We'd fight among ourselves, but nobody else could rip on us, or the other one would be on them."

Under their tutelage, the Indians have gone 311-26 in duals, winning 16 straight sectional and 13 Duneland Athletic Conference titles. Portage has reached the team state finals seven times in the nine years of the format and had eight individual state champions. Pendoski also started Portage's youth wrestling program, now some 400 strong.

"I've learned so much from everybody, not just in wrestling, but in being a teacher, a coach, a mentor to kids," Pendoski said. "When we left them (Wednesday) night, I told 'em my one regret is I didn't start a book because of all the stories over the years. There's been great times and sad times. We talked about having five weeks left. How's the final chapter going to read?"