

I have 'mat herpes,' Sunnyvale wrestler warns, calling for delay of California high school championship

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Blake Flovin, center, with his parents, Rena and Rick Flovin, in their home in Sunnyvale, Calif., Wednesday, March 2, 2016. Flovin, a Mitty H.S. senior, contracted herpes during a wrestling tournament in mid-Feb. He has many lesions on his face and as his dad says, he looks like "Elephant man." The family wants to stop the state tournament from taking place on Friday and they're running out of time, so they're appealing to the media. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group) (Patrick Tehan)

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SUNNYVALE -- A high school wrestler who believes he contracted a highly contagious virus known as "mat herpes" during a recent tournament at San Jose's Independence High came forward Wednesday to plead that officials postpone this weekend's state wrestling championships because other Bay Area wrestlers were exposed.

State interscholastic officials said they won't cancel the tournament in Bakersfield, insisting they follow rigid protocols to protect wrestlers from infections and viruses like "herpes gladiatorium," which is spread mostly

through red skin lesions. All athletes go through "skin checks" before the tournament and any athlete with an active infection won't be allowed to compete.



Blake Flovin shows the skin lesions on his forehead and face. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group)
(Patrick Tehan)

Nonetheless, Blake Flovin -- a senior at Archbishop Mitty High in San Jose whose face was covered Wednesday by a severe red rash -- not only detailed what he and his parents consider lax health and safety protocols at high school wrestling matches, but also a dirty little secret: that high school athletes sometimes use makeup or Band-Aids to cover lesions that could disqualify them from a match.

"The rules and the swiftness in the way they deal with skin issues in wrestling is flawed and kids and coaches try to skirt around the issues," Blake said Wednesday, flanked by his parents, Rena and Rick, in their Sunnyvale living room.

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"It's widespread to hide the disease because of scholarships" at stake, said Rick Flovin, who is Mitty's assistant wrestling coach and is trained as an EMT. He says he helped institute at the school some of the strictest hygiene standards in the sport, including requiring wrestlers to step in a pan of disinfectant before they step on a mat. That safety measure was not in place at Independence High, he said.

Officials with the California Interscholastic Federation, which govern all high school sports, said Wednesday that high schools are required to follow national safety standards.

"We've had many times where our doctors have removed an athlete who was showing symptoms or some sort of skin lesion. This is something we deal with on a regular basis," said the organization's senior director Brian Seymour, who is also tournament director in Bakersfield this weekend. "We follow protocol to the letter of the law."

The federation's spokeswoman Rebecca Brutlag acknowledged, however, that "nothing is foolproof."



Rick Flovin shows a poster made for his son, Blake Flovin, in their home in Sunnyvale, Calif., Wednesday, March 2, 2016. Blake Flovin, a Mitty H.S. senior, contracted herpes during a wrestling tournament in mid-Feb. He has many lesions on his face and as his dad says, he looks like "Elephant man." The family wants to stop the state tournament from taking place on Friday and they're running out of time, so they're appealing to the media. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group) (Patrick Tehan)

Herpes gladiatorium is prevalent enough in the sport that in 2007 the National Federation of State High Schools Associations published a "position statement" on the disease and its effect on wrestlers in particular, saying that "in recent years, control of skin infections has become a crucial part of high school wrestling."

Blake's family believes he was infected during the Central Coast Section championships on Feb. 19-20. CCS Commissioner Duane Morgan, who ran the tournament at Independence High, contacted all the coaches of athletes on Tuesday who wrestled with Flovin, alerting them to the exposure. Morgan did not immediately return a phone call or text Wednesday afternoon.

Cupertino High coach Mike Moyano agrees the state championship must go forward and that coaches do a good job enforcing cleanliness rules.

"It would be terrible to penalize kids who have worked so hard all season to try to realize their dream," Moyano said. "To shut it down because someone else didn't do the right thing. It's not something so prevalent to where we need to shut down a state tournament."

Blake said he believed he contracted the disease either from wrestlers or contaminated mats in Independence High's huge main gym -- and it didn't look like cleanliness was a top priority. The boys' bathroom next to the wrestling floor was wet and dirty.

"The kids were walking in there with their wrestling shoes, then straight out of the bathroom and onto the mats. Kids' faces were shoved into the mats where those feet were," Blake said. "It's disgusting. Kids were joking that if you walk in there, you're probably going to get pink eye."

Instead of pink eye, however, Blake, one of the top wrestlers in the 220-pound division, says that just a few

days after the tournament, his glands felt swollen, then he broke out into what he thought was acne on his face.

A doctor first diagnosed it as staph infection, but after Googling his persistent symptoms, Blake was certain he had herpes gladiatorum. A different doctor confirmed his suspicions on Tuesday. That sent him and his family on a quest to notify wrestling officials as well as their family lawyer to try to delay the tournament.

"I'm not asking them to shut it down forever, but it absolutely needs to be delayed to allow for the incubation period to pass with all the wrestlers Blake wrestled with," the family's lawyer, Robert Powell, said Wednesday.

Blake last wrestled Feb. 25 in a practice session at Monta Vista High in Cupertino with wrestlers from that school as well as South San Francisco High, Gilroy High, Monte Vista Christian in Watsonville. That would make the start of this Friday's tournament on the edge of the 8-day incubation period.

The herpes virus stays with wrestlers their entire lives, but may lie dormant for long periods of time. The virus becomes contagious when wrestlers have a flare of lesions.

"The lesions could look like red bumps, or they can look like small blisters," said Dr. Bob Nishime, a San Jose sports medicine physician and member of the USA Judo Sports Medicine Sub-Committee.

"Sometimes they don't look suspicious at all. They can just look like a red patch."

He added that wrestlers might not show symptoms immediately upon contracting the virus and could potentially spread it to others, even if no skin lesions are present during an incubation period. Wrestlers should be held back from competing until the bumps are crusted and dry, which usually takes one to two weeks, according to Nishime.

Band-Aids over the lesions fall short, he said. "Just covering up won't do the trick."

Blake agreed to come forward to spare other athletes from suffering the same fate: a virus that may go dormant but can flare up the rest of his life.

"It's mainly scary and it's pretty embarrassing to have it," said Flovin, who

took second place in his weight division at the CCS tournament and is also a football standout who has committed to play at Holy Cross in the fall. "No one wants to be known for having herpes."

His father said as difficult a decision it was to come forward, his son had the character to do it.

If he didn't, Flovin said, "how many people are going to get this, one more, two more, three more?"

Blake said he had a chance to place in the state championship this weekend, but he obviously won't be competing. He's still contagious.

He's made a personal decision as well. "I'm never going to wrestle again."

Staff writers Glenn Reeves and Darren Sabedra contributed. Contact Julia Prodis Sulek at 408-278-3409. Follow her at twitter.com/juliasulek

FACTS on HERPES

Herpes gladiatorum comes from the herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1). It is commonly transmitted through skin-to-skin or oral contact with exposed lesions.

Although HSV-1 can cause genital herpes, it is more closely associated with cold sores. Most genital herpes are caused by a different strain of the same virus.

U.S. citizens are likely to know someone with HSV-1: Globally, 3.7 billion people younger than 50 carry the strain of the virus, but may not show symptoms.

Source: World Health Organization

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