

Family, friends and coaches of 'Jo Jo' remember the late wrestler for person he was off the mat

Many people live life moment to moment. For a special few of us, each moment is a lifetime. One of these extraordinary young persons, with the personal magnetism, instant charm, and positive energy to elevate all whose lives he touched, is young Josiah (JoJo) Armstrong of the Grindhouse and Sunnyside Wrestling Clubs (Arizona).

There are those we will remember for the rest of our lives, no matter how short or long we share this time on earth with them. JoJo lived and loved and learned each day, every minute of his 12 years. Whether you knew him as a fierce competitor or as the coach by your side, as a likable prankster or as everyone's best friend, JoJo made an unmistakable impact.

On January 24, 2019, JoJo was diagnosed with liver failure, but tests for a source came back negative. One week later, he was still training teammates for state even though he was not feeling his best. Twenty-four hours later he was gone.

"JoJo was that type of kid, one who always puts others before himself and gave his best to everyone," coach Mike Bravo said.

A healthy and successful athlete, one who experienced loss by score but who was never defeated in spirit, Josiah succumbed without warning or known cause.

"In his time, JoJo beat some highly-ranked kids but could not defeat an idiopathic (spontaneous) disease that came from nowhere," his dad James said.

"An electric spirit, JoJo profoundly impacted my life," said Sunnyside coach Fernando Villaescusa. "JoJo will remain in my heart always."

"Josiah's charisma and special presence made you take notice when he walked into a room or participated in a tournament," said parent Kirsten Krzysztofciak.

"Not one thing will ever define that kid," said Wyatt Fry, a close friend two years younger, who looked up to him, appreciating the way "he taught me to fight harder in everything. JoJo helped me win championships."

When JoJo was but 7, coach Chris Zasa started him and his 9-year old brother James Jr. in the sport. Both boys "knew how to fight but not how to wrestle." Although JoJo went "from nothing to fantastic," of greater import to Zasa, "Josiah taught me to teach more than just technique. He showed me and all his teammates how to excel on the mat and in life."

JoJo's older brother James, Jr. remembered: "JoJo was always caring for others. He was so intelligent. He knew just how to wrestle me in order to make me better."

"JoJo was a leader, a peace-keeper with the best of intentions," Zasa asserted. "He wanted to make sure that what's right is right, not just for himself but for everyone. That's what he was here for."

"Josiah has never been afraid to tell you what's on his mind," mom Janelle declared. "All the kids gravitated to him and loved being around him. His smile just melted my heart."



Arizona's JoJo Armstrong (top), age 12, died this winter after a liver failure. His family and wrestling community remembers him fondly as a young man who was always unselfishly giving to others.

In January of 2017, at a 10-&-Under Tulsa Nationals, Josiah did a live video interview with FloWrestling.

"What I really like to do is practice, because I like to learn new things: to start from scratch by breaking things down," he said. "I am most thankful for this moment: to get to compete here with my coaches and teammates. They are the ones who brought me along the way to get to where I am now."

James Armstrong reveled in and felt welcomed by the RMN event atmosphere, "loving the camaraderie, family orientation, and celebration of God. My kids made friends from all over. Ed Gutierrez's sons Joshua, Adam, and Jordan have always been like family to us."

At the 2018 RMN Monster Match Nationals, JoJo wagered with his coach for a sandwich if he won.

"In the finals, after he was slammed on his head, Jo just smiled at me and asked: 'Do you still have that sandwich?'" coach Anthony Leon related. "After he won, but before the referee raised his hand, JoJo took a bite of his prize! We can all learn from his attitude of gratitude."

JoJo made an immediate impact because he was unfailingly upbeat, engaged, and smiling. Just the same, win or lose, it was evident he was grappling to find a peace within himself.

"Wrestling has taught me self-discipline, how to carry myself with passion, and how to keep in high spirits without throwing a fit or putting myself down," Josiah said. "If I do lose, I tell myself to stick with it; I remind myself that I still got it, that I can still place."

"JoJo was ahead of his time, knowing how to enjoy life before many of his peers did," said Leon, head coach for Sunnyside High in Tucson.

"He had a knack for getting the best out of people. Before high school state, we placed the last shoes he wore on the wrestling room wall. We won the 2019 Arizona team championship by over 100 points. He had the ability to inspire even older kids to wrestle for him."

Josiah was a student of the sport who helped teach moves at practice and explain to his peers what they could do better in their matches.

JoJo also practiced with the Sunnyside Wrestling Club, where his drilling partner was Audrey Jimenez.

"Josiah will always hold a special place in our hearts," her father Guillermo related. "He did not like bullying; he'd call out teammates whenever he saw it going on. When he practiced with Audrey, he didn't treat her like a girl. She earned his respect. After they competed against one another in a tournament, Jo was right there coaching her from the corner in her next match.

"On the evening of his visit to the Phoenix hospital, he wasn't feeling well, but he still drilled with Audrey to prepare her for a tournament."

Wrestling two days later in Josiah's memory at the SDIKWA Super Bowl Brawl, she beat highly-ranked Robert Jones of the host school Poway (CA) and was named the tournament's Outstanding Wrestler.

Brother James, Jr. remembers JoJo before each competition by performing the back hand-springs and backflips they used to do together.

Loss at such a young age by any means is especially tough when one knows JoJo as his peers did.

"It's true when they say it takes a village to raise a child," Janelle said. "His teammates and coaches never gave up on him — they knew he was going to make it somewhere in life." ■

By Bill X. Barron



James Armstrong (below) celebrated with his sons Josiah (left) and James at the RMN Grand Canyon championship. He lost his son Josiah in January