

Wrestling helped NCAA champ/MMA star overcome bullying and excel in life

Note: The following is the life and wrestling journey of former wrestler and current coach Mark Munoz, who related his thoughts to Bill X. Barron.

As I have lived, learned, and battled, life is a cumulative experience of wins and losses, victory and defeat, adversity and reign, submission and triumph. In my journey from being bullied in eighth grade to NCAA champion and the No. 2-ranked MMA fighter in the world, I have learned to embrace the hard times.

With determination and faith, you will eventually rise above, succeeding despite the odds. For God gives us life; the rest is up to us to accept His challenge. God created us to serve others with passion and presence; my mission is to help kids be who they are while also becoming better persons.

Through wrestling, I learned the true meaning of life. However, when five bullies jumped me in 8th grade, I had no idea there was any other way than to survive. It took my father, a native Filipino immigrant who served 25 years in the U.S. Navy, to lead the way.

I had been approached by James Boutain, a member of the Vallejo (Calif.) High School team, to join wrestling. I still remember my father's admonition to this day: "If you join, you will wrestle the first day, the last day, and every day. You will not quit."

That lasted through one practice where we were learning the double leg. After practicing the position, we went live. I had the offensive position down, but no one had taught me how to defend it. So, after getting taken down, pummeled by cross faces and turned in half nelsons and wings, I was ready to give up.

Dad found me sitting at home the next day instead of at practice.

I told him: "I don't want to wrestle anymore." Stoically, he reminded me of the commitment I had made. Leading me by the arm, he returned me to a place I would learn to love.

After one month, I knew I had it in me to succeed in this sport if I just kept driving to find my best every day, working to discover who I was as a wrestler. But first I had to change my thought process from being focused on getting beat to learning how to overcome.

Coach Mike Minahen and his assistant Bob Gonzalez taught by actively trying out moves on me. Day after day, after getting beat up in practice, I would spend all night thinking through how I could counter their attack. The next day I would successfully defend against the same moves, then learn new moves and master their counters after I had thought them through over the next 24 hours.

Through this process of trial and error, I became a two-time California state champion, first-team ASICS All-American and a 1996 NHSCA high school national champion. Just as importantly, wrestling fostered

By Mark Munoz



Mark Munoz, who won an NCAA title for Oklahoma State, then ranked high in MMA, is now a coach for the Reign Wrestling Club in California.

a mentality of excellence whereby I was on honor roll all four years and made the National Honor Society.

Early in my wrestling career, Coach Andy Foley of the Vallejo Police Action League introduced me to freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling. In a similar learning process, after getting thrown repeatedly in a head-and-arm by his son Stefan, I mastered that move, using it to make the Cadet World Team that traveled to Russia. My coach Roye Oliver later became a Veterans World Champion in 2007.

I went on to compete on three Junior World teams, earning the silver medal in 1998. Learning freestyle and Greco made me a much better collegiate wrestler. The international style teaches you how to throw, how to defend throws, and how to be solid technically by not exposing your back to the mat.

This background helped me become a two-time NCAA All-American for Oklahoma State and NCAA champ in 2001. Remaining at OSU, I became a grad assistant for three years, compelled by the need to give back to wrestling what the sport had meant to me. I had the skill and knowledge to do so and thus believed this would be where I would remain.

But the desire to compete was still well and alive. When Urijah Faber invited me to get into MMA, I quickly learned that wrestling is the ultimate neutralizer for fighting. Even a very good striker can be taken to the mat by an experienced wrestler. Through experience, I have learned that it is better practice to spar smarter versus harder.

Although I rose as high as the second-ranked fighter in the world, I never forgot that God created us to serve and to love others more than ourselves. Now settled in California's Mission Viejo region, my Reign youth wrestling club is rooted in the belief that as God reigns, we must learn how to reign over our competition.

What I most appreciate about Ed Gutierrez and RMN Events is that they weave faith into the fabric of wrestling. That faith transcends everything else he does for the sport of wrestling. In me, I believe that Ed sees one who is driven by similar principles. At the same time, RMN seeks out the best competition from all over the country. For both aspects, Reign Wrestling Club is at every RMN event we can attend.

Ed often invites me to address the RMN wrestlers and coaches before a tournament. From my heart, I offer them wisdom garnered from many years in the world arena: Champions are not defined by wins, but by how many times you pick yourself up after a loss. Rise above adversity. Embrace the grind. Love what you and do what you love.

On the sideline, I teach kids to be composed in the moment, to welcome the challenge. If you can learn to be calm amidst the storm, you will find your way to turn the match in your favor, despite being down in points. Wrestle the match inside yourself, then battle your opponent to come from behind to win.

Coaching is not just about technique. It's all-encompassing, beginning with teaching perspective on wins and losses, followed by an emphasis on mental as well as physical preparation to bring your best to meet the moment.

My coaching is based upon each wrestler's personality. I may teach everyone similar technique, yet the execution of that move will differ with every individual. A coach's role is to add to a wrestler's style, adapt and refine based on what they do best, not change them to fit what may work for others.

Moreover, as a society, we must learn to live with one another with love and compassion. Truly listen to and know each other's story. Hear how they grew up and what they had to overcome. Share with them that none of us are perfect; all we can do is live the best life we can. Live, learn, and get better.

I hesitate to think what my life would be like without wrestling. It has not been a straightforward path, yet I have embraced the journey. Being bullied in eighth grade was a significant turning point in my life. I chose wrestling — and the sport chose me to do good for others.

I now lead an anti-bullying campaign, where I have spoken to at-risk youth in full detention facilities like the Youth Leadership Academy in San Bernardino and Juvenile Hall. In elementary, middle and high schools all over Orange and L.A. counties, I have been humbled to share my story.

The process of learning is a life-long journey. If you learn how to handle adversity, how to rise like a Phoenix from the ashes, you will succeed in getting through the most difficult moments in your life, with your heart full and your mind ready to confidently take on whatever life confronts you with next. ■

UPCOMING WRESTLING EVENTS

FREAKSHOW

OCTOBER 16-17, 2021
WESTGATE LAS VEGAS RESORT & CASINO
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

MONSTER MATCH

NOVEMBER 6, 2021
NATIONAL WESTERN COMPLEX
DENVER, COLORADO

THE HAMMERS

NOVEMBER 20, 2021
LEGACY CENTER INDOOR ARENA
FARMINGTON, UTAH