

Let Kids be Kids

That's the goal of the Northwest All-Stars during this pandemic

By Bill X. Barron



The 9U Northwest All-Stars of Oregon celebrated after winning the Smash Nationals in Arizona in December.

Just as every wrestler learns how to transform obstacle into opportunity, this ever-present coronavirus challenges each one of us to rediscover who we are. Amidst the strife and stress of the unknown, we return home to one true and forever wrestling community.

What better home can there be than a wrestling team: the builder of an invested community, an extended family that knows no bounds, in a willing and absolute fight to the death for an entity larger than self.

For 9-and-under wrestlers throughout the Northern Pacific Region, the vision of one father — Charles Grijalva, a graphic designer and MMA promoter — and the passion of another dad — Josh Gillespie, a construction contractor — unified under one calling as the Northwest All-Stars.

“Our central objective is to remain together united in support,” stated Josh.

Faced with limited practice times, growing restrictions and practically no in-state competition, Josh began by redesign-

ing a workshop on his West Lynn, Ore., property, then outfitted it with mats donated by his Clackamas Community College teammate Josh Rhoden. This essence of wrestling as community begins directly in one's own backyard.

Charles and Josh then reached out to all Oregon and Washington clubs, small and large, seeking top wrestlers who wanted to compete in out-of-state tournaments. Just formed in the summer of 2020, the NWA Club has already captured several individual and dual team titles, as well as earning the prestigious RMN-NUWAY Freak Show 9U team championship in Idaho this October.

On the first weekend in December, the Northwest All-Stars beat out Cali teams SoCal 40-24, Red Wave 51-14, Team Granite 64-3, and Team MatTime 75-0, as well as Team Aggression (WA) 34-31 and Team JFlo (TX) 43-19 at Smash Nationals in Arizona. This was the first tournament in RMN Events' annual Marvel series,

where 2000 wrestlers competed for awards in the image of The Hulk. NWA brought home Smash team trophies for both the 9U individual and dual team competitions.

What began with just four kids now has a solid 25 kids practicing on weekends and camping out in Josh's backyard.

“Once you discover people with the same mindset,” Charles said, “promotion comes naturally. People finally saw something positive happening for their kids and they wanted to be part of it.”

Josh and Charles are ably assisted by Coach Dylan Reel and former Clackamas wrestlers.

“The whole idea was that in the rural Northwest, while we might not have enough good kids in one area, we could come together as a region,” Josh said. “We did not want to alienate anyone, so we worked on fair representation. With so many club affiliations, all the wrestlers had as one was the larger team. Together, they could all share this.”

Still, the journey has not come without local and state resistance.

“It's a Catch-22,” cited Charles. “How do you stop the spread and yet let kids be kids? Ultimately, it came down to helping kids pursue what they enjoy. With the support of their parents, not only do these kids have opportunities, but they also stay away from trouble.”

The businesses of four parents are the glue for the NWA program. J & J Masonry (Gillespie's business) hires Clackamas wrestlers for summer work and makes annual contributions to the college program. Coach Grijalva's Vicious Fight Gear graphic design and MMA enterprise (Salem), Rocky Evans' Hard Rock Construction in Redmond, and Jason Jex's Rogue Functional Wellness LLC out of Medford all contribute by coaching practice, orga-

nizing team get-togethers, coordinating travel, and supplying equipment.

Wrestling is family and it is most certainly community.

“You have to appreciate the Gutierrez family for keeping wrestling going, allowing kids to stay motivated,” said Charles. “RMN Events puts on a fantastic show with a lot of time and effort. Yet they take time for prayer and for recognizing the kids. Without their efforts, I do not know where we would be as a sport.”

“You have to live life,” asserted Josh. “Just see the love and the hugs these kids gave each other this past weekend. Win or lose, they supported one another. Through so much loss and adversity, we need wrestling to bring us together.”

Now in his 15th season as head coach of the Cougars, Coach Rhoden's Clackamas squad won a record five straight NWCA dual team championships from 2014-2018, in addition to two national individual team titles and produced 84 All-Americans, 27 national finalists, and 12 national champions. The 2019 team set a national team scoring record with 176.5 points.

Now through support from the greater wrestling community, CCC's brethren — the Northwest All-Stars — are making their mark on a national stage. Coming together as a regional team, they have realized the character of an unbeaten spirit inherent in every one of us who has ever stepped on a mat.

Irreplaceable life lessons learned on and off the mat, these young grapplers now know that whatever they face, they can and will rise above challenging times. For a wrestler who learns to triumph over tragedy, living life fully becomes one's greatest reward. ■