

RMN EVENTS' OUTWEST SPOTLIGHT

Sport pulls people together after fire

By Bill X Barron

For three harrowing hours, John Bunch did not know whether his brother Lance Garner had escaped the deadliest fire in California history, as it was in the midst of completely ravaging over a dozen of his relatives' homes, before leading to total devastation for the 27,000 residents of Paradise.

As the name suggests, Paradise is hidden in the foothills a hundred miles off the coast north of Sacramento. This serene valley was known for its own weather pattern, which is cooler by 10-20 degrees, for its peace-loving neighborly welcome to all-comers and for its championship-caliber football and wrestling teams; all in a relatively crime-free environment.

No longer a retirement community, just one week before the November Camp Fire, the town of Paradise approved a 61-million-dollar grant to improve its community's schools. This "awesome place to raise a family" with its intersection of creeks and ponds is now altogether reduced to white ash and unrecognizable rubble, a vibrant northern California commonwealth now but a memory.

"Sixty years of family history erased," John said.

John's electrical contracting business is just one of thousands of structures all gone. Fortunately, his father, mother, two brothers, a sister, and many other family members escaped through pitch black smoke, a blaze which enveloped an entire town in hours.

John is part of the Paradise junior pro-

"We will make this community whole again. Together, we will be strong." – Coach John Bunch

gram. With 80 kids in their small-town youth wrestling program, John and Coach Robert Vanucchi at the lower level, as well as program head coaches Jeff Klassen and Shannon Magpusao, have fostered their athletic dominance.

At the February 2018 RMN Events Rumble in Reno, where 1500 participants — ages 5-18 — come from 30 states, Paradise took home four championship belts, including John's 5-year-old daughter Peyton. In the 2017-18 season, her second year of wrestling, young Peyton finished 22-2, earning the coed NorCal Elementary title at 40 pounds.



Wrestling has been a salvation for John Bunch and his children, Peyton (left) and Jaydin, after the Camp Fire in California destroyed their home (above) in Paradise, Calif.

(RMN Events photo)

"Awesomely put together and run by super helpful people, RMN Events puts on quite the show," said John.

Even though the tournament had so many entrants, John is thankful that they allowed Peyton to register the night before; "otherwise she would not have been in position to win her belt. Because RMN tournaments open with a prayer and the national anthem, as the first wrestler on his mat, my son Jayden had the unforgettable experience of standing in the middle of the arena while the anthem played."

Reflective of its residents' character, although the size of the town qualified its football team for a smaller division, the athletic department has long elected to play in the state's large-school league. Playing with pride and purpose, the football team has won seven of the last fifteen sectionals.

Just as its championship teams have demonstrated their resilience and ability to overcome overwhelming odds, John proclaims: "We will make this community whole again. Together, we will be strong."

Paradise teams have long been a "thorn in the side" of area teams for their never-give-up mentality. With the "amazing support" of clubs in Chico, Oroville, Sutter, Yuba City, and Orland, the junior wrestlers of Paradise still are able to train and compete.

"Our teams are built from numbers, not

money," John said. "Our people work hard, take care of one another, and support our athletes. I am proud of Paradise and will always call it home. The structures may be gone, but the people who make up the community are still here. We have taught our children right and wrong, and how to survive in this world. Our battle has just begun. Together we are strong."

On a fateful day earlier in November, John was thankfully working close to town when he spotted the fast-advancing fire. John acknowledges the "incredibly brave firemen and policemen who saved thousands of lives while jeopardizing their own. They took action designed only to save others without concern for their own circumstances."

With just enough time to round up dogs and family, but no time for any belongings, the Bunch family is amongst those who will carry on the proud tradition of success in this small community. Pride will lead the survival of what's best in Paradise.

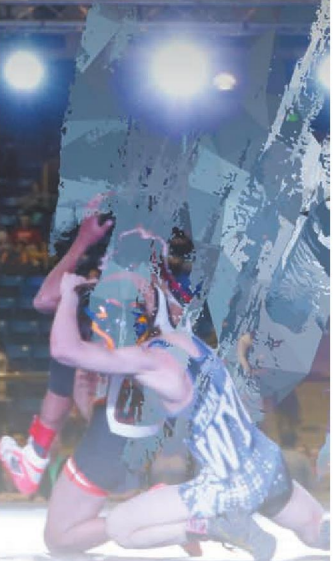
Among the possessions lost in the all-claiming fire was the championship belt that Peyton earned in 2018. In a special ceremony at the February 2019 Rumble in Reno, RMN Events will award her a replacement belt. Like her community, Peyton Bunch will build upon previous success with pride as well as a renewed belief in herself. Paradise and Peyton are champion rebuilders. ■

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