

Burns, Oregon—home of bedazzled jean pockets, cowboy hats, and lifted diesel trucks. With a population of 2,783, Burns hosts more oversized belt buckles per capita than anywhere else in the world. This little eastern Oregon town believes religiously in wrestling. Arguably, every Burns boy and his father is or has been a wrestler; some of the toughest and hardest working people I know live in this rugged rural town. Needless to say, I was apprehensive about being at a Burns wrestling camp and getting my butt kicked by a skilled partner. Even so, I was excited for the opportunity to learn and be challenged.

“If you don't have a partner, hustle to the middle!”

Three prepubescent middle schoolers, including myself, shuffled reluctantly to the center of the wrestling mats. Like most else in Burns High School, the mats were peeling, faded, and could be referenced back to prehistoric cave drawings. “You two, partner up,” Coach Brock pointed to two boys to the left and right of me. I kept my eyes down, anxiously counting the aberrations to the mat's surface. Now, I was the only wrestler left without a partner and the only female in the room.

Coach's eyes floated skeptically from my fresh-out-of-the-box Mat Flexes (a horrendously ugly shoe that graces the foot of every new wrestler) to my ratted low ponytail and wrinkled attire. “And you...” Coach smirked. All 90 pounds of me twitched nervously. Suddenly, Coach's eyes widened. “Hunter!” From the back of the room appeared an eighth-grade boy with a pigeon-toed shuffle, whose cheeks jiggled as he ran. Hunter, my new partner, outweighed me by 40 pounds, reeked of puke, and was stained with a Gatorade ring around his mouth.

In the next three days of the camp, I did the best with the circumstances I was given. Unfortunately, the coaching staff largely ignored me, and my partner and I spent most of the time in the corner, occupying the less valuable real estate. I actually became close friends with Hunter in the following years, and we can laugh about how inexperienced we were.

As a female wrestler, I have had to learn to advocate for myself in a mostly male-dominated sport. Though this is not always the case, I have found that many wrestling coaches may ignore their female athletes by giving them little to no instruction, inexperienced practice partners, and even encouragement to quit. The first few years of my wrestling career, I lacked confidence in my abilities and struggled to speak up for myself. While there is something to be said for doing your best given the circumstances and respecting that other wrestlers are also eager to improve, I eventually recognized that I had worked too hard for too long to be put in the corner anymore. Little did I know, this seemingly insignificant three day wrestling camp in Burns Oregon would actually shape much of the trajectory of my life even now. In the wrestling room, I began partnering with coaches or other challenging opponents and prioritizing my improvement by asking questions. Advocating for myself and having confidence translated into

every other aspect of my life, especially my academics. This wrestling camp, as well as my wrestling career in general, have inspired me to develop relationships with my teachers, become a better communicator, and be more teachable. Most importantly, I have learned that I need to choose what I want in life before it chooses me. I know that I can make the best out of any situation and through my hard work, I can create my desired outcome.

“Hi! What’s your name?”

“Abby,” she whispered. Abby is a freshman girl who has recently joined our wrestling team.

“I’m *so* glad you're here! Follow me.” As team captain, I led warm-ups and made sure to help Abby through each movement. Although I had a few years of experience on her, we ended up being partners for the practice. I was so excited to be her partner because I had been in her Mat Flexes before. I thought to myself *she’s lucky I’m not a fan of Gatorade.*