

Graduation / Memorial Day Issue

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The purpose of this paper is to be beneficial to the community it serves in every way possible.

Samantha Shepherd - Girls' State



I started writing this paper to give details along my journey, but wasn't sure what you wanted, what questions you may have had...so after many failed attempts, this is the result I came up with.

Sincerely,
Samantha Shepherd

Most people around Fruitport will recognize me from serving up their favorite ice cream, as I have been serving up smiles at Norm's in Fruitport for the last 4 years; some may know me from my 12 years in Girl Scouts selling cookies, campouts and service events; others may know me from my 9 years participating in the Muskegon County 4H program, while some in my local community would call me the horse girl who rode "Buttercup" everywhere. Although Fruitport is rather small, hardly anyone knew there's been a girl on the boys varsity wrestling team.

I feel like the best kept secret to Fruitport and shine on the possibilities in girls wrestling. Many are just learning Fruitport had a female on the boys varsity team, and many are reading more and more locally about girls wrestling being on the rise. West Michigan is slowly on the rise for female wrestling, it's been a slow start, but I am hoping to be able to help influence and promote more girls in our local schools to give it a try. Womens wrestling is the #1 growth sport and offers many outstanding scholarships; a couple years ago there were few colleges that offered such a program, but now has been marked with well over 100 different colleges that are offering womens wrestling. I am honored to have my name as the first female wrestler that placed at a state tournament on "The Wall" and I look forward to seeing more girls strive for their place on that wall. It's a remarkable honor..

Wrestling for me didn't start in the family, as the youngest of six kids, often people wonder; wrestling started for me as an interest to try new things, which lead to regional, state and national placings my first year as an 8th grader. Since then, I have many placings in local, state and national level tournaments, including this year's MHSAA state placing for girls high school, sponsored by MWA, as Michigan is not yet sanctioned and recently, my grand championship this past month in the MYWAY (Michigan Youth Wrestling Association) program.

My mom has always been the ultimate supporter for my busy lifestyle kinda ways, as she has given this same dedication to each of us kids. From keeping me on schedule, packing the car for the long road trips, to doing my hair each and EVERY time. I am thankful that she has always been there even when my closest friends didn't understand. I am thankful she gave just as much tough love as I needed, to think for myself, my choice, and to stand for what I believe in. I am proud to say I have an amazing relationship with my parents, and I am so lucky to have the support, love and freedom to be myself. With their love and support with the love from my siblings, family is more than my solid ground, it's my foundation.

I knew after my middle school explosion of interest, I was going onto high school and against

the biggest hurdle, being taken seriously as a girl in a man's sport. The first two years were almost shattered due to a heck of a concussion my first year that left me off the mat until the very end of the season and a hospital stay that set my second season way behind. These two years were my biggest and hardest years of disadvantage, struggle and pressure from my peers. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to learn, and I wanted to be taken seriously, not only with my teammates,

but with the coaches as well. My first year was filled with obstacles, for instance, being taken seriously - for being a girl wrestling on a guys team, why? and what was the motive? Which nobody asked really why... to my second year that was filled with struggle from JRA, (juvenile rheumatoid arthritis), pushing beyond my limits, improper conditioning for my body, not being able to keep up to the guys, still against male ego of not fitting into the team and other guys mentality... "can't let a girl beat you" mentality, to the disappointment of not getting my varsity letter, which was a huge blow to the inner core, but, it didn't shake my love for the sport or the desire to continue on.

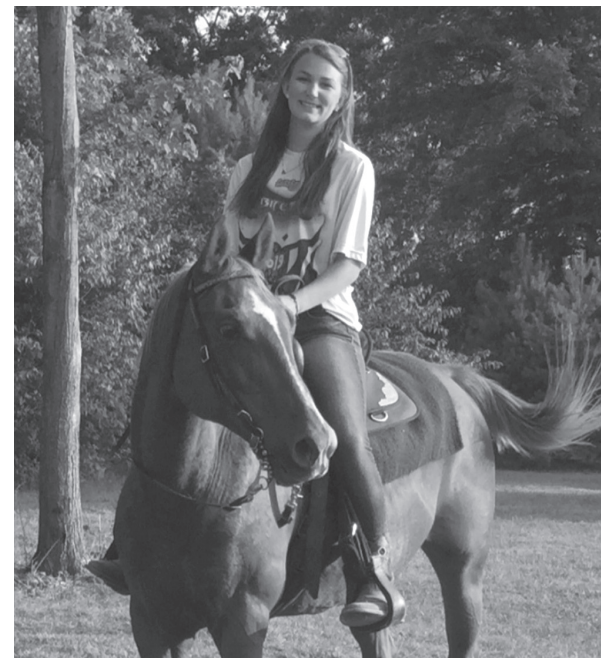
My Junior year of high school, more people started to notice that I wasn't giving up and I was serious about being on this team. Socially wrestling wasn't so much a discussion, as my girlfriends really didn't understand, but I had my teammates, and I was lucky enough to have a great team leader that helped push that extra set of workouts, the positive I needed to hear and the one who led by example. I think it was then that I gained my teammates on a different level, from invader to competitor, while removing the gender aspect and teammate mentality that pushes the drive to say "if you get better, I get better...and if I get better, you get better." Then the girls state tournament came around and I made some bad moves in the early rounds and knocked myself out of placing. Again, my chance to show my team that I can compete on the women's end that I haven't achieved often enough with the guys. Winning. To show my team that I can defend the medals I've earned and prevail, but placing at states didn't happen.

No way was I giving up my senior year of wrestling and not pushing through to get better, be better and be stronger. We were fortunate enough to still have a season, although shortened, I put in the extra hard work, watching my weight to minimize cutting weight, listening to my body and with sheer determination, my senior year was going to be great! And it has been. I think with my increased drive and this year's dedication, my coaches witnessed this, and really stepped up to prepare me for states, my teammates I normally didn't wrestle got worked into my routine. I still had my losses, but I had more wins than losses this year, and finished this season out with 3rd place in MHSAA #112, and followed that up with being grand champion at MYWAY tournament in Kalamazoo for girls #118.

For the past 5 years, off season from my school team, I have (and will) continue to compete in different women's and dual tournaments, including MYWAY, NUWAY, USA. Because girls tournaments are harder to come by in general, travel is almost always required. One disadvantage if you are looking for the experience and don't have a home club, gym or team, but traveling is and has been so rewarding, by gaining experience wrestling other females on the mat and gaining friendships. Unfortunately, Nationals, NUWAY (National Youth Wrestling Association) tournament this year has been delayed from normal scheduling but now has been

scheduled for the same day as FHS graduation...this is one time I gladly give up my national placing, for the grand walk across that stage.

My future plans are not written in stone yet; Besides wrestling and high school, I have been a student at the Career Tech Center (CTC) for the past two years in the Health Sciences. I have two great jobs that both have potential for future growth, I am doing well. While I may not have decided what it is that I want to do, I have many options of different colleges across the United States due to such growth. I've had great discussions with coaches from Campbellsville to Indiana Tech, from Iowa to West Virginia, but none of them have had enough (at this time) to draw for me to an "undecided" career and a mountain of debt, nor be away from my family at this time. I love to wrestle and look forward to competing on the college level, but, debt is inevitable but being buried in it isn't appealing in today's world. I would also love for women's wrestling to get sanctioned in Michigan high school athletics, grow across all levels of colleges, not just NCAA in Michigan, offer a diverse level of colleges, and maybe offer something on this side of the state. I will be able to compete throughout the next year in various tournaments by age rules; I plan on seeking out opportunities as they arise (or I make happen), enjoy and benefit from the time put into the sport, get more exposure on the mat, such as attending the national showcase recruitment tournaments and to be involved with local schools (if available) while helping to continue the growth and passion of this sport, not only to young girls, but middle and high



school girls most importantly. I know waiting a year to go off to college isn't unheard of, but less heard of for scholarships a year down the road, but I am determined to allow myself to grow another year, save another year and narrow down the direction I choose to go. Yes, the road is less traveled, but that's ok, I like gravel, and if it's meant to be, the journey will be worth it all.

As you can see, nothing came easy. It has been work. Many tears, frustration, losses and disappointments, the oddity from your peers, wondering if you're doing it right or even good enough....Always remember...Do what you feel is right, even if you stand alone. For me, wrestling felt right.

If I could ever give any advice, my first would be to the guys: Be a good partner. Let the male ego go, and simply be a good partner. Girls that are willing to go the mile OFF the mat to be ON the mat and will try their best to keep up with you, is the same girl who isn't there competing against you, she is competing with you. And for the girls, don't think everything comes down to size and muscle. Muscle is important, you need it for a good defense; size isn't always an advantage or disadvantage, but endurance and technique will get you a win every time.