

[Mike Randles](#) with [Preston Bunty](#). (example of a future BSU student)

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One of my former wrestlers recently closed out his senior season. That Saturday at state was an emotional day but for good reason. He knows I am proud of him—but not because of a podium or a medal but far more because of the journey he made to reach that moment.

When I first met Preston Bunty, he was maybe an 8th grader. A small kid full of emotion. He didn't have the same background in wrestling as those he hung around with. As a matter of fact, he didn't have a background in wrestling at all. Despite his anemic background, he started attending off-season wrestling practices in the spring of his 8th grade year. While I welcomed anyone who wanted to get better, Preston forced me to re-evaluate that decades-old philosophy. First, off-season tournaments are generally not the place for beginners to get their feet wet. Second, Preston seemed to carry his feelings near the surface and any defeat—even in the practice room--caused them to come hissing and bubbling over. And last, he just didn't seem to have the physicality to make up for what experience had denied him. In short, I was worried that an experienced kid or even an inexperienced kid with a few pounds of muscle would impose his will on him without much resistance. There are few things more disturbing in this sport than watching a beginner being flung around by some jacked kid sporting a national team singlet.

Ultimately, though, it was one of these traits that sold me on him: his competitive nature. Despite the lack of experience, the lack of physicality, the lack of temperament, I couldn't help but appreciate Preston's hate for losing and genuine desire to get better. Years back my own son got hammered at the Viper Tournament in the 6th grade. Through gritted teeth and a flurry of tears, he punched the mat and angrily shook his opponent's hand. I was fit to be tied by this display of anger when an onlooker touched my shoulder and sagely offered, "Hold on, Dad. Help him control that but don't let him lose that. That right there, that hate for losing is why he is going to be a very good wrestler." The onlooker was the father of two of Washington's best at that time.

I reluctantly took Preston to Billings for his first big off season tournament that spring. Sometime before his first match, he got sick but still competed. He finished 1-2. His freshmen year, wrestling in a combination of JV and a few varsity matches, he collected six wins. No doubt he was frustrated as kids with even less experience managed to put together a few more wins. Nonetheless, he did off-season again, not missing a practice. He entered freestyle tournaments and was laced and gut wrenched across the Inland Northwest. During this time, Preston seemed to spend more time punching mats than wrestling on them. In his second trip to Billings, he posted the same record, 1-2.

His sophomore year, he doubled his win total to 12 and just missed qualifying for state. In the off-season, we collectively upped our commitment to improving. Again, Preston attended every practice, including occasional trips to Spokane to practice. In Billings that spring, he won four matches and just missed placing. He continued to train in the summer and competed at Western Regionals where he collected his first Greco win. Preston's win-loss record to this point was nothing to write home about—but his effort was. As suspected those early tears and angry outbursts were genuine. What made them genuine? In short, he was doing something about the very thing that caused them: losing. As I often told kids who would come off a mat upset because they lost: If it genuinely bothers you, then you will do something about it. The irony, of course, is that the more you do about it, the more losing sucks. The bigger the investment, the bigger the expectation that it will pay off. When you don't make much of an investment, than how bad can losing really hurt?

There is no such thing as an "overnight success." Preston collected nearly twenty wins his junior year and qualified for state. He started racking up wins against some of those who had dealt him losses just a year previous. Although he didn't win a match at state, not even Preston himself, the poster boy for pessimism, could deny that he was improving. With one season left to prepare for, Preston left little to chance. Last spring, Preston was in the room 3-4 days per week, including

two trips per week to Spokane to work with a crew at Central Valley. At state freestyle late last spring, he teched an opponent who in previous years had used Preston as a rag doll. He didn't stop there, though. He trained for junior nationals then joined Team Idaho on that trip to Fargo where he picked up a win on the toughest high school stage in the US.

Those who know Preston's journey also know that there's more to it. Preston's travels took him through some darker valleys. I would sometimes watch the door that led into the wrestling room and wonder if he would keep the faith. Would he keep showing up? If anyone had a right to throw their arms into the air and say, "I'm done!" it would be him. But he didn't. Whether it was tough competition or blind justice, Preston simply wouldn't make excuses.

And just when it all seemed to be coming together...

In early August, I was offered a new job. While there was a multitude of factors to consider (possibly moving my kids to new schools, career change, selling a house, buying a house, and, of course, not being a head coach) it was Preston who weighed heavily on my mind. I had reached a point in my career where the change just made sense and if I hadn't met that slight kid full of mischief years previous, it would have been a much easier decision. When offered the job, I asked for a few hours to talk to a few people. In nearly every conversation, Preston's name came up. I wanted to be in his corner when that defining moment came.

Eventually, I came to realize that that "defining moment" really had already taken place. A medal would not define Preston Bunty. His journey had defined him and I was just incredibly fortunate to be part of that journey. A medal, a podium could not change the path Preston had already traveled. Still I knew that placing at state had been something of a true north for Preston, guiding him toward some better place for the past four years.

When I moved to my new job, I kept one eye on CDA and another on Sandpoint. Preston would collect more than 30-wins his senior year. At the state tournament, he had a hiccup in the quarter-finals, a single loss away from not placing. I found him in the staging area, teeth gritted and a flurry of tears. I knew he would be ok. That hate for losing was as strong as ever. A short while later, I watched from behind the rope as Preston extended his journey another 75-yards or so to the podium.

Admittedly, I was on the verge of cardiac arrest when Preston wrestled his blood-round match (the round that determines if you are or are not a state placer) but I knew that with or without that medal, Preston would be fine. Since the spring of his eighth grade year, Preston had been traveling. Undoubtedly, he occasionally got lost but who wouldn't in such darkness. Still he found something within himself to persevere, to not make excuses, to take risks, to fall—but always rising.



Ass't Principal Coeur d'Alene High School & Student-Athlete Preston Bunty of Sandpoint High School.

These COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS haven't yet been given the chance to weigh-in on the decision if wrestling deserves a seat at the table.