Lessons from the Mat in Hampstead

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NC Legend Training Center teaches strength, confidence and self-discipline to Hampstead youth through wrestling.

Photography by Matt McGraw

It was a grade school teacher who first showed Chuck Johnson he could live the dream. For him, that meant teaching kids math by day and coaching wrestling by night.

Johnson first stepped on a wrestling mat when he was a fourth grader in his home state of Pennsylvania. Since then, he's made his love of wrestling a lifelong pursuit.

> **"Wrestling is a black-and-white sport involving math, weight and scoring points," Johnson says on why it clicks for him. "It also sparks my competitive spirit thanks to the one-on-one component."**

After high school, the Pennsylvania native made his way to compete at the Division I level at Bucknell University, where he was a four-year starter. He later spent more than two decades coaching at Line Mountain High School in Pennsylvania, helping earn four state championships and place 31 state winners.

When he made the move down south to Hampstead in 2021 in search of life by the beach and a warmer climate, Johnson brought his affinity for wrestling with him, but he's finding that awareness of the sport looks a little different down south.

> **"In Pennsylvania, most parents are really into wrestling," Johnson says. "Here, wrestling is very new. A lot of kids don't start until ninth grade."**

To those outside the wrestling world, the sport may seem violent at first glance. But while wrestling is certainly physical, Johnson and his wife, Elisa Willis, a registered nurse who spends her off-hours helping around the club and homeschooling two of her children, say its strategic and mental components are what make it truly special.

> **"It's physical chess," Willis says. "You're trying to execute the correct move quicker than your opponent."**

It was a natural move for Johnson to open a wrestling club, NC Legend Training Center, in the area. The club is creating opportunities for local kids to discover wrestling, develop their skills and learn the life lessons that come with it. Johnson, who also teaches sixth grade math at Topsail Middle School, is so community-focused that even his own children were not aware until recently that he owned the club.

> **"Chuck's name is on the lease, but he would be the first to tell you it is impossible to run a club by yourself," Willis says. "We have been extremely blessed to be surrounded by people who believe in wrestling, not just as a sport or an activity, but as a tool to harness, foster and develop character."**

The couple first met when Willis brought her son, Logan, to his first practice. A couple of years later, after some convincing from Johnson to get Willis to say yes to that first date, the pair tied the knot and blended their families, with Willis bringing her four children into the mix alongside Johnson and his daughter. And wrestling has become such a family affair that Willis' oldest daughter is set to attend the University of Mount Olive next year on a wrestling scholarship.

NC Legend Training Center found its footing sharing a space with Crest, a Brazilian jiu-jitsu gym. But once business for both began booming, Johnson and his team knew they needed their own space. Enter the center's 5,000-square-foot training facility with specialized classes, weight training, electronic check-in and summer camps.

For his level one wrestlers, typically kids ranging from age four to seven, Johnson's goal is to keep things fun while working in a few fundamentals.

> **"If I can get the kids to burst out laughing that's a win in level 1 practice," Johnson says. "Our goal is to get them confident in wrestling and make it fun. It's also an outlet. In our culture kids are taught to be gentle, but here they can get it out."**

In level 2, the curriculum hones in on mechanics and technique. At level 3, the most advanced group, athletes still work on technique while learning the mental grit and attitude it takes to excel as a wrestler. Willis adds one more thing level 3 wrestlers should be prepared for: a potential for nosebleeds.

With a motto to teach kids to “train hard and become a legend,” Johnson and his team of coaches — including Caleb Patton, Mark Gonzales, Spencer Dye, Bryan Peterson, Garron Lytton, Braxton Brennan, Kevin Veneziale, Drew Torza, Jake Pence, Brant Leadbetter, Joshua Villareal and Hunter Rollins — alongside his administrative team of Elisa Willis, Lexie Willis and Sarah Palmer, everyone works together to make the wrestling club a place to find community, feel welcome and get stronger — mentally and physically.

That perseverance is not only a lesson Johnson and Willis hope to instill in the club’s members and team. It’s one they’ve had to practice in their own lives too.

After losing their 15-year-old son, Luke, the couple found new ways to lean on each other and honor his memory. A few weeks after Luke's passing, Willis found a stuffed animal at Target that they named Percy, a nod to Luke and his love of the Percy Jackson series. Before long, Percy became a beloved presence at the training center and the inspiration behind Percy's Pantry.

Proceeds from Percy's Pantry help sponsor families in need, provide wrestling shoes and support other community needs, all in Luke's name. Now, Johnson and Willis are working toward the pantry's next goal: purchasing an AED for the mat room.

If Johnson could explain NC Legend Training Center in a word, it would be community.

“It’s not my club. It’s everybody’s club,” he says.

And it’s that philosophy that has influenced what makes NC Legend Training Center such a strong addition to the community, both on and off the mat.

STRENGTH IN COMMUNITY

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An N.C. native and an N.C. State graduate, I have explored many wonderful places throughout the globe (shoutout to my yearlong stint in Bangkok, Thailand) — but there is no place I love more than my home state. I currently reside in Raleigh (go Pack!), but I spend many a weekend at the N.C. coast — from city ventures in downtown Wilmington to relaxing jaunts in Topsail and Surf City. Beyond penning prose for Carolina Marketing Company, I work full-time as a communications manager, teach fitness classes at the YMCA and freelance for a multitude of magazines statewide. When I'm not working, find me perfecting my yoga practice, finding my next flight or outdoor adventure, or binging Survivor.