

## “Crashing Glass Wrestling Mats”



*Figure 1 Left-Right Coach Brooke Richards with signees Mahala Finley, Tayla Grove, and Danielle Simmons*

When growing up I used to love watching a show called “King of the Hill.” This show, created by Mike Judge, followed the lives of a family and their friends in the fictitious City of Arlen, Texas. The show itself tackled a variety of modern-day topics and issues encountered by the average family. The show was set in the early 2000’s so the issues might seem to be outdated at first glance, but these are issues that are still being talked about and debated today.

Take season 2 episode 10, aptly titled “Bobby Slam.” The episode chronicled a young boy’s attempt to join the middle school wrestling team. Later it is revealed that to make the team, he must wrestle a girl, Connie, who is also trying to make the team. The episode is then riddled with poking fun (fun being a more “colorful” term) at a girl trying to make it in a so-called “man’s sport.”

Women have not only been competing in combat sports but have been doing so in mixed sexes for a couple of decades at this point in history. But they are doing so in more frequencies across the board. BSU (Bluefield State University) supports a women's wrestling team. And who is on our team?

Mahala F., a Senior at Princeton Senior High School, for one, has been living the reality that Connie experienced in the show. She has been making moves on the wrestling mat that would make the MMA legend BJ Penn proud. Due to her hard work and effort, she has managed to earn a spot on the University's wrestling team.

She joined two other young women, Tayla G., and Danielle S. -- also the first in their respective areas to sign for women's wrestling -- when signing for the University.

I had the opportunity to speak with Mahala and ask about how wrestling has impacted her life.

A: As a young woman, why was having access to a wrestling team important to you in high school?

M: Having access to a wrestling team has not only allowed me to build friendships that will last a long time, but it has also taught me how to defend myself if I ever need to.

A: Does that same sentiment hold true as you progress to the collegiate level?

M: Yes, it definitely does. Also, I am very excited about being able to travel to other states!

A: Did you have any setbacks to joining the team or staying on the team due to your size and gender?

M: Oh, yes, most definitely. Being the only girl on the team for 3 years had setbacks. For example, I was not allowed to do a lot of the team building activities because I could not be alone with the guys. I also was not allowed to walk around without a guy with me at all times, like a body guard. I have always been the smallest on the team, so I have had to work with people larger than me for years, and I still do.

It is obvious that Mahala is concerned with the camaraderie that she will build from the team. Coach Brooke even commented on her ability to cheer for the other female wrestlers on opposing teams. She mentions that even Coach Blaze, BSU's Men's Wrestling Coach, has said that some young men could never make friends with someone they just wrestled with.

Coach Brooke is the first female head wrestling coach of Bluefield State University. She had the privilege of joining Bluefield State and developing a wrestling program for these young women. After hearing Coach Brooke explaining to the young inductees how they were going to fit into the program, I got the notion that she really cared for her student athletes and considered them all one part of a single unit.

I also got a moment to speak with Coach Brooke about her wrestling career.

A: How long have you been wrestling and coaching?

CB: I have been wrestling since middle school and started coaching right after I graduated College.

A: Why did you choose BSU?

CB: Bluefield State is close to where I grew up, and it was important for me when looking for a head coaching job to find a place with growth and a vision for wrestling and be closer to home.

A: Do you have any specific goals for this coming year?

CB: The main goal this year is to get young girls on campus and get them adjusted to college wrestling.

A: Why is it important for these young women to have access to combat sports and more sports in general in high school?

CB: It is important for young women to have the opportunities to compete regardless of it being a combat sport [or not]. I do believe that combat sports such as wrestling help women build confidence, though.

A: Is that true at the collegiate level?

CB: Yes, giving women the opportunity to compete while pursuing a degree is the most important thing to produce more female leaders.

A: Why should future students choose the BSU wrestling program over others?

CB: Future students should choose Bluefield State because we are providing young women an opportunity to learn and grow academically and athletically.

A: Where do you see BSU's women's wrestling program in the future?

CB: I see Bluefield State as a nationally ranked program that is producing national qualifiers and All-Americans.

### The Future of BSU Women's Wrestling

The future of the wrestling program depends on the young talent in the surrounding areas. Since the women's program is still in its infancy, not many young women know that it is accessible to them. The more middle schools and high schools that allow and teach young ladies to wrestle, the more doors of possibilities open for them in the future.

"Women's wrestling is the fastest growing women's sport in the country right now and I am excited to be at Bluefield State to help the growth of women's wrestling at the college level." -Coach Brooke.