

Army Vet Champions Wrestling ‘Like a Girl’

Sally Roberts’ 2012 deployment to Afghanistan led to the creation of a nonprofit that promotes female wrestling

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After a failed Olympic bid, wrestler Sally Roberts set her sights on the Army. If she hadn’t, she never would have volunteered for deployment to Afghanistan or met the women who inspired her nonprofit, Wrestle Like A Girl.

“I was incredibly depressed from not making the Olympic team,” said Roberts, who joined the Army in 2009 after placing second in the 2008 U.S. Olympic Team Trials. “I knew if I didn’t change my physical space, my mental space would never change. The Army gave me the opportunity to re-constitute myself in a new way.”

Roberts served with the Army Reserve’s 320th Psychological Operations Company out of Clackamas, Ore., from September 2012 to April 2013. During her service, she said, she witnessed a camaraderie she had previously only seen in the Olympics.

Her voluntary deployment to Afghanistan, where her duties included speaking with Afghani women, also reinforced the love she had for her country — and her ability to do a job.

“Little girls would see me, and they saw a soldier [who] was a woman,” Roberts said, “and I could feel the awe that they had looking at me.”

Roberts said her military career has been the “most influential experience” in her life, and, at the end of the day, taught her how to lead.

From Mischief to the Mat

Roberts said she had a “troubled childhood” and by the time she reached eighth grade was given a choice between juvenile detention or an after-school activity. She tried out for “all the girl sports” and was cut every time. Then she found wrestling, a “no-cut sport.”

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She became the first in her family to graduate from high school and college, secured two world bronze medals in freestyle wrestling and is a three-time U.S. national champion.

Wrestling, according to Roberts, had “almost everything” to do with her joining the military.

“If I had made the Olympic team, I would’ve had a heart full of joy,” said Roberts, who was named USA Wrestling Woman of the Year in 2018 by USA Wrestling in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Not making the team in 2008 prompted her to look into the military, and she approached a recruiter with a goal in mind — the “toughest job any girl can have right off the street.”

She also asked to deploy to Afghanistan, and it was there she realized there might be “something left” for her in the wrestling world.

“I volunteered for deployment because I had unfinished business in my heart when it came to representing the United States of America,” Roberts said.

From WCAP to Wrestle Like a Girl

Once in the Army, Roberts became aware of the World-Class Athlete Program (WCAP). She joined after returning from Afghanistan and finished out her time in the Army with WCAP. For Roberts, WCAP provided a “soft landing” for her transition out of the military.

“From that point, I knew that I could have an impact on the world that was larger than myself,” Roberts said, “and that was where Wrestle Like A Girl came from.”

Had it not been for learning to believe in herself while in the military, she said, she does not believe that she would have created Wrestle Like A Girl in 2016. And those girls she met while serving in Afghanistan factored into the decision.

“If someone’s going to say something about this sport or about girls in America, I want it to be me,” Roberts said.

Through Wrestle Like A Girl, Roberts said she wants to show that women are competent and able to “rise up to challenges each and every day.”

In the nearly four years of the nonprofit’s existence, Roberts said her biggest accomplishment is two-fold — helping female wrestling become the “fastest growing sport” in the U.S. and convincing multiple stakeholders she has worked with that female wrestling has value.

Roberts’ nonprofit work includes coordinating women’s wrestling clinicians who lead “empowerment” camps and clinics that teach wrestling techniques to young female

wrestlers. The young women also learn about the importance of proper nutrition, hydration and sport psychology.

To learn more about Wrestle Like A Girl, visit wrestlelikeagirl.org.

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