

THE PERFECT MATCH

BY NICOLE TAFE

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The Peters Township Wrestling Teams and the Big Red Wrestling Boosters will host the Fifth Annual Match for a Marine this February to help support veterans both locally and nationwide.

As Peters Township's wrestling season begins, members of the Varsity and Junior High wrestling teams and the Big Red Wrestling Boosters are gearing up for their favorite match of the season—Match for a Marine.

Match for a Marine was started in 2012 by booster parent, Mike Buckiso, as a way to raise funds to help local veteran and former Marine Corps Sergeant Doug Vitale.

Vitale is married to PTHS graduate Alexis Abraham, and was also a wrestler at Kiski High School. In 2011, Vitale suffered severe injuries as a result of an IED explosion while serving in Afghanistan, including the loss of his legs and the ability to speak when blood loss led to a series of strokes. After more than two years at military hospitals in Bethesda, MD, and Tampa, FL, Vitale returned home and he and his wife moved in with Vitale's parents in Finleyville.

In 2014, the Vitales were selected by the Tunnels to Towers Foundation and the Gary Sinise Foundation to receive a smart home. "Many fundraisers were planned to help make this house a reality," says Big Red Wrestling Booster President Beth Mary. "Match for a Marine was PT wrestling's way to contribute." With an initial goal of 500 fans, the group reached out to local communities, asked them to attend a high school wrestling match and pay a \$5 admission fee that would be donated to the cause. The Peters Township Dance Team and the Abraham family also joined the cause in strong support, and have continued to be instrumental to the success of the Match for a Marine events.

Exceeding all expectations and goals, the proceeds and donations from the first Match for a Marine totaled an astounding \$20,000. To date, \$55,000 has been raised for the Vitales.

This wrestling season will mark the fifth year of Match for a Marine, and all are hoping it is going to be the biggest event yet. "Our group realizes and truly appreciates the freedoms we have and cannot take for granted," says Mary. "It's important to the Big Red Wrestling Boosters that the young men on the wrestling teams learn first-hand about heroes like Doug, who defend us, sacrifice for us and stand up for us all around the world so that we can enjoy our lives and freedoms."

In years past, PTHS has worked with Upper St. Clair and Bethel Park wrestling teams to gain support for the event, and have established great relationships with the rival teams and fans who have shown extraordinary sportsmanship and support.

The Peters Township Varsity and Junior High Wrestling Teams and the Big Red Wrestling Boosters were recently acknowledged by the Peters Township Character Counts Committee for their dedication to helping veterans here at home and nationwide. They received an award on Nov. 1 for their Match for a Marine efforts.



Doug Vitale (center) with Lance Corporal Gunner Martin (left) and Lance Corporal Drew Clements (right), both of the 4th Law Enforcement Battalion, MP Company Bravo.



Sergeant
Doug Vitale has been the Honorary Captain at the past three Match for a Marine events. He was still undergoing rehabilitation when the first match was held. The PT wrestling team is 4-0 for the Match for Marine events, and are convinced that Vitale is their lucky charm!

The Fifth Annual Match planned for Feb. 8, 2017, and PTHS will host Mt. Lebanon. Plans are underway and the event will raise funds through admission fees, concessions, t-shirt sales, a 50/50 raffle and donations.

"We truly hope this event can make a difference for as many soldiers as possible, by providing resources for them to be able to purchase things like wheelchair coats, that alone cost approximately \$500," says Mary.

In special celebration of the fifth annual event, the PT wrestling teams and the Big Red Wrestling Boosters are reaching out to other schools around the United States to offer ideas and help start Match for Marine events countrywide. Currently, the organization has a commitment from a school in Massachusetts and now that wrestling season is in full swing, other WPIAL schools will be contacted.

Also special to this year's event, veteran organizations and elected officials will be invited to help bring attention to the cause. "While attendance has slipped in the past few years, we hope to pack the gymnasium this year and have the entire Peters Township community join us in supporting the cause," says Mary. "We hope to see five more WPIAL schools also host their own event, and extend outreach to at least five schools outside of Pennsylvania. We already have Massachusetts, so we only have four more states to go!"

PT's Match for a Marine plans to continue and expand the events here at home and across the country for years to come. "Our long-term goal is to have at least one school in every state host a Match for a Marine, and bring attention to helping and supporting our veterans and their amazing families," says Mary.

The group welcomes anyone from the community who would like to get involved. "Anyone who would like to become a volunteer for the event or sponsor their own event can email the booster club," says Mary. Efforts to begin social media pages are also in the works, and of course all are invited to attend the event at PTHS on Feb. 8, 2017.

Match for a Marine is truly important to the PT wrestling program, Big Red Wrestling Boosters and the Peters Township community. "It's just the right thing to do," says Mary. "We are very lucky to have a volunteer military and veterans like Doug who have selflessly put their lives on the line to defend our freedoms. It is our hope that this event makes a difference and shows people like Doug and Alexis just how much we appreciate their sacrifice."

For more information or to become involved with Match for a Marine, email bigredwrestling@gmail.com. ■

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Doug and Alexis Vitale (center) pose with members of VFW Post 764.