



Photos by Rob Varela / Star staff

Jared Hatland shows the scar he got when he underwent open-heart surgery when he was 2 years old. The Thousand Oaks High junior wasn't interested in wrestling, but friend Brandon Jansen asked him to at least try it once. "I came out and liked it," says Hatland.

Close to his heart

By Rhiannon Potkey

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The scar is faintly visible under Jared Hatland's singlet.

It starts at the base of his throat, runs down the middle of his chest and ends at the bottom of his rib cage.

For Hatland, the scar serves as a constant reminder of his membership in an exclusive club.

Hatland is an open-heart surgery survivor. The Thousand Oaks High junior wrestler had a hole in his heart repaired when he was 2 years old.

Although doctors advised Hatland to stay away from football, wrestling barely made the cut.

"They were iffy about it, but they let me do it," Hatland said. "They feared maybe if something jolted my heart it would be a concern, but everything seems to be fine. I think my parents are more scared about me breaking a bone, which I ended up doing anyway."

Doctors discovered Hatland's heart problem during his normal 6-month baby checkup.

They detected a murmur and diagnosed him with an atrial septal defect.

His family was told to wait a year and see if the hole would close on its own.

It was 12 months of trepidation for his parents.

"The whole year you are wondering, 'Should you let him run? Let him jump? Let him do anything exciting?' " Hatland's mother Leslie said. "You just try to get on through that year as best you can."

By the time Hatland returned to the doctor, his heart had doubled in size and surgery was required.

During the procedure, they also found some of Hatland's arteries were going into the wrong chambers.

But the surgery was a complete success.

"It was kind of a relatively new procedure at the time, at least for children," Hatland said. "It turned out really well though. There was no scar tissue and I don't really have any limits."

Hatland was given confidence to explore those boundaries thanks to a camp for children with heart disease he began attending at age 7.

Camp del Corazon is a non-profit organization that provides free summer camps on Catalina Island.

Staffed entirely by volunteers, the camp gives nearly 300 children a chance to participate in activities like rock climbing, kayaking and water polo.

"I look forward to that more than my own birthday," said Hatland, who still attends the camp and wants to eventually become a counselor. "It is just a real blast and really cool to meet kids with similar stories. I can remember waking up with tubes down my throat. I will always be able to say I had heart surgery just like you did."

By his first day on the beach, Hatland felt an instant connection with the campers.

"It blew me away because I had never seen anybody else with a heart surgery scar before," he said. "But everybody had one just like me."

The camp also provided a sense of comfort for his family.

"The No. 1 thing it did is get us to relax and set up as many parameters as we could, but not prevent him from doing anything he wanted to do," his mother said. "At some point, you say this is what he wants to do and as long as he is getting the right training and physical supervision, you have to kind of let a little bit of faith in there."

Hatland, a black belt in karate, never wanted to wrestle. But his friend Brandon Jansen made it his goal to get Hatland on the mat.

He gave Hatland the form to fill out and called him the day before practice started at Thousand Oaks.

"I knew he was looking for a sport and I thought it would be fun for him to do something where he also had a friend in it," Jansen said. "He thought just big guys do it, but not really."

Hatland decided to attend the first practice to prove how much he hated the sport.

"I came out and liked it," Hatland said. "The practice was really hard, but for some reason when I got done I just felt really good."

Thousand Oaks wrestling coach Kerry Lyne initially had low expectations for the 6-foot-2, 143-pound wrestler nicknamed "Bones."

"He seemed like a real nice kid and I was happy to have him, but I really didn't think he would be a huge contributor," Lyne said. "But he has some skill and he's had some big wins for us this season. He pays attention and loves the sport and will be a big part of our team next year."

Camp del Corazon Executive Director & Co-founder Lisa Knight says Hatland is a perfect example of what the camp is all about.

"We want these kids to have the opportunity early in life at being successful at what others discouraged children with heart disease from doing in the past," said Knight, a registered nurse. "Now with new technology and understanding of how much children can push themselves, they are able to do more than ever and believe in themselves."

Although Hatland's scar has faded with age, it still elicits attention from friends.

"They tell me I should say I was mauled by a bear or bitten by a shark," Hatland said. "They want it to be something really dramatic. But it is always fun explaining what really happened."