

Two up for HSOT honors



Wheatmore's Jake Tuggle lays the ball up against Asheboro in the 29th Courier-Tribune Christmas Invitational at Asheboro high school on Dec. 27, 2019. Tuggle is up for the HSOT's Stuart Scott Courage award. (PJ WARD-BROWN/SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-TRIBUNE)

WHS' Jake Tuggle, UCA's Heaven Fitch up for three honors in awards ceremony streaming live tonight

By Tony Bolick
The Courier-Tribune

ASHEBORO — Wednesday night, a pair of local athletes are up for three categories in the 2020 High School OT (HSOT)



Tuggle

awards. The ceremony will be aired on FOX 50 WRAZ in the Triangle area along with being live-streamed online on HighSchoolOT.com and the HSOT app.

Jake Tuggle of Wheatmore High School and Uwharrie Charter's Heaven Fitch are the nominees. Tuggle is one of six up for the Stuart Scott Courage award, named for former ESPN personality and UNC-Chapel Hill alum Stuart Scott who died of cancer Jan. 4, 2015. For Fitch, the record-setting Uwharrie Charter Academy wrestler is up for a pair of honors. She is in the running for female athlete of the year and story of the year.

Tuggle's struggle

Tuggle was just recently named to The Courier-Tribune 2020 All-County basketball team and is soon to begin his collegiate career as a player and student at Pfeiffer University. But it was a lot of work to get to where he is, a journey that nearly didn't start.

Testing during Mandy Tuggles' pregnancy revealed issues that had doctor's suggesting to her and father Doug Tuggle that they terminate the pregnancy. They made it through the pregnancy, but that was only the beginning.

"When he was born, he had severe club feet. He has had to go through multiple surgeries to correct the condition," said Doug, who was also his son's varsity coach for his final season at Wheatmore. "All of the struggles he has gone through. He was in casts for the first year of his life."

Jake was taken to Duke when he was five days old. At six months, he went in for surgery. Most of his first three years were spent with his legs in casts. As he

got older, he was running, playing soccer, but still struggled, falling down. They went back for more surgeries, breaking the bones, realigning his feet. By the time he was nine, he was out of the hospitals and on his feet.

After all those surgeries and breaks and healing, he still has to deal with some pain to this day.

"It's still there," said Jake. "Some nights after games it's not too bad, just like a sore ankle or something. But there's still some (nights where) it can really hurt."

"It's not too bad. I have a massage chair that I use to try to help. It's all just part of it."

And even through all that, he chooses to spend his time helping others less fortunate. Like Caleb Hill, a student with Down Syndrome which Jake's group is complete a dream meeting between Tim Tebow and Hill.

Actually, he works with a WHS group, the Junior Dream Team which is part of another group.

"Dream on 3 is a non-profit organization that helps out kids with life-long conditions," Jake said. "It's basically like Make-A-Wish. It grants a sports dream for kids."

"I was fortunate that I had the opportunity to play and (will) play on into college. Some of these kids don't get that."

"He's tried to bring the things that he's able to do now. He wants to help them experience what he has," Doug said. "He knows what those kids are going through. He's been there."

"He took on the task of finding something to relate to with kids in his situation. (Turns out) We were very fortunate that the doctors were wrong."

Heavenly year

The two honors for Fitch are both completely wrapped up in what was easily a career year for the junior Eagle. In her sophomore year, she began etching her name into the NCHSAA record books and she just kept on with a breakout year.

"I'm surprised that I was nominated. It is pretty neat to be recognized that way," said Fitch, who added that her big year and being a state champion still really hasn't sunk in yet.

"Not fully. I don't really think about it too much.



UCA's Heaven Fitch flexes after becoming the first female to win an NCHSAA Championship in the 1A 106 in the Championship. (PJ WARD-BROWN/SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-TRIBUNE)

It just kind of seems like it didn't even happen almost."

Last year, she survived to the semifinal round of the state tournament in Greensboro, finishing fourth and becoming the first to place in the state as a female, wrestling with the guys and not in the new girl's invitational tournament the NCHSAA was hosting that same weekend. Fast-forward to this past year, and Fitch was rolling, racking up wins and gold medals at tournaments. In January, she surpassed Brenoah Neal as the NCHSAA's winningest career female wrestler — with her senior still to go — on the way to Most Outstanding wrestler at regionals as a regional champion — another state first — and then her record-setting state title.

"I've always felt a lot of pressure. It always made me pretty nervous, but once I got to state (tournament), I was a lot more confident than anything," Fitch said. "There has been a lot of support. A lot of people telling me that they are proud of me which felt really nice."

Still, the UCA rising-senior says it's a lot of pressure and attention that she's not really after with all that has happened

in her career. She just followed behind her brother's and has been doing something she's had fun with her whole life.

"I'm an introvert. I didn't expect any of the attention at all."

Fitch spends her time outside of wrestling with art (mostly painting) and she also plays the ukulele.

As for the future?

"I'm not really sure. It would be great to win (state title) again," Fitch said, but beyond that, she is not sure.

She wants to go to college, but isn't really set on any specific course. She adds she might look at biology or psychology as she says she's always liked and been pretty good at science. And wrestling? Well, she is weighing her options there, too. She has received a few offers, but has not made up her mind if that is something she wants to do or not.

But first up, there is tonight and, perhaps, another chapter to what has already been a great year.

"I think it'd be pretty great (to win). It would be great to get wrestling out to other girls," she said. "I've done it almost my whole life. It was just another step to take. A way to (challenge) myself in skill (level)."

And she's pretty much been up to the challenge all along. You go girl.