

Sports & Recreation

Mesa man celebrates milestone in bowling career

BY ZACH ALVIRA
Tribune Sports Editor

Only Maresca was just 8 years old when he first picked up a bowling ball during a trip to the lanes with his family in New York.

At the time, he thought of bowling as a fun sport to pick up and play during his youth years. Little did he know, it would help shape his life for the better.

Now 71 years old living in Mesa, Maresca has used the sport to put himself through college and support his family. With that, came a milestone only few have achieved in the history of the United States Bowling Congress Open Championships — 50 years of participation.

"I started bowling nationals when I was 17," Maresca said. "Back then, they would move it all over the country. From 1971 to about 1998, I never missed any events."

Maresca fell in love with bowling dur-



A Westwood grad, the 71-year-old began bowling when he was 8 years old in New York and moved west to pursue the sport throughout his youth and now adult life while living in Mesa. (Pablo Robles/Tribune Staff)

ing that first trip to the lanes in 1958. He continued to bowl throughout his high

Mesa senior athletes excel in final high school year

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The 2020-21 school year presented an opportunity to achieve redemption for many Mesa senior athletes after the pandemic forced the cancellation of the spring season in 2020.

Leading into the fall season, when COVID-19 case metrics reached a high last summer, the focus of many athletes shifted from what they would do once they get on the field or court to whether they would be able to play at all. The Arizona Interscholastic Association ultimately gave the green light for all sports to go on in condensed seasons, and athletes took advantage.

"To be able to play again made all of our kids happy but especially our seniors," Red Mountain softball coach Rich Hamilton said. "It was one of those things where we never knew if it would be taken from us again."

Red Mountain's softball program was in



Joseph Hamilton, center, a senior cross country and track & field distance runner at Red Mountain, won the 4,800-meter relay championship this spring while his father, Rich, led the Mountain Lions' softball program to the state title game. (Courtesy Rich Hamilton)

cancelled after just a few games last year.

Throughout the summer, fall and winter, the heartbreak from the 2020 spring season was used as motivation by seniors Lina Ellis, Brooklyn Ulrich and Alexis Cooper to succeed once they were able to begin practices in January. They helped lead by example on the field and it paid off for Red Mountain, which made a run to the softball title game as the No. 7 seed in the playoffs.

For Hamilton, this year's groups of Red Mountain seniors hit closer to home. He watched his son, Joseph, win the 4,800-meter relay this spring and place third in the 4x400-meter relay. Hamilton and his wife, Tammy, were also able to sit along side Joseph when he signed to continue his running career at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

"I was so happy. I was a proud dad," Hamilton said. "To see him win that championship in that race, it was unbelievable. It was a lot of fun."

Winter sports athletes went through a



Dobson senior Rachel Early played a key role in the team's eight-run to the 6A girls' volleyball semifinals this past season. (Pablo Robles/Tribune Staff)

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all back-to-back, but they have led to opportunities to support his family and prolong his career.

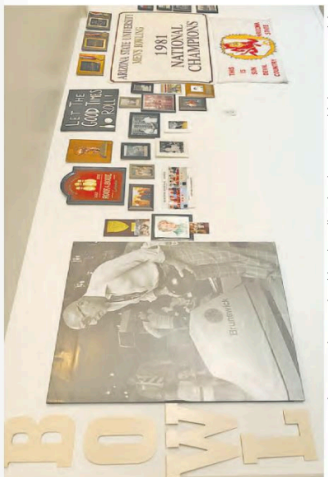
He was hired to take over the Arizona State men and women's bowling programs. He coached the Sun Devils for eight years and won a national championship with both programs in 1981. He also served as the assistant manager and manager of the rec center where the bowling alley was on campus.

During that time, Maresca opened his own pro shop at an alley in north Phoenix. At the time, it was the only pro shop in the area, and he saw it succeed right away. He eventually went on to open a new pro shop at Via Linda Lanes in Scottsdale.

His first shop was sold 15 years ago. His second shop in Scottsdale sold just over two years ago. The memorabilia from both shops currently hang in his garage.

"The fella who bought the shop, we've been friends for over 30 years," Maresca said. "He was actually a bowler of mine at Arizona State. He made me promise him if I ever sold my pro shop, I would let him get the first opportunity to buy it. So, he did."

Maresca's bowling career has come



Maresca owned two pro shops at local bowling alleys but has since sold them. Memorabilia created by his daughter that once hung in the shops are now on the wall of his garage. (Courtesy Tony Maresca)

with plenty of success. So much to the point he can't recall the exact number of local championships he has won over the course of his time competing.

He won a national championship with USBC in 1971 and does keep track of the

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reinstated before they managed to begin play. But when they did resume, they made the most of it.

Led by seniors Rachel Early and Jaden Leslie, the Dobson girls' basketball program had one of its best seasons ever as the Mustangs made a run to the 6A semifinals.

The two seniors were the leading scorers of the team and the over-achievers of the season. All heart and soul of the program.

"This year, for us, it was all about seeing how far we could push each other and how far we could go," Early said in March. "Our sophomore year we had the play-in game and then last year we lost in the first round. So to get to this point as seniors, it means everything."

Other seniors from schools all over Mesa left their mark on their respective programs.



Steven Cervantes, a senior at Mesa, helped lead the Jackrabbits to one of their best seasons in history as they finished the No. 2 ranked team in 6A during the regular season. (Pablo Robles/Tribune Staff)

Rahni Turner, a senior from Westwood, fell just short of a state record in the 100-meter hurdles at the state track & field meet.

Khamis Hassan, a senior at Mesa, and two other seniors on the Mountain View football team, led the way with the most receiving yards and tackles, respectively. The Toros finished 6-2 on the year, the best since 2015.

Zeke Branham, one of the best players to ever come out of Skyline High School, left his mark on the program his senior year. Recruited to Fresno State as a defensive back, Branham recorded 71 total tackles



Zeke Branham, a senior at Skyline, signed his National Letter of Intent to continue his football career at Fresno State. Branham played several positions for the Coyotes and helped set a strong foundation moving forward. (Pablo Robles/Tribune Staff)

while also accounting for 749 total yards of offense.

While the year didn't go as well as he had planned in terms of wins, Branham, just like all seniors in Mesa, left his mark on the program.

"Everything I've done, I'm starting to finally see it all pay off," Branham said. "It's just an amazing feeling."

that mark. At that point, he believes he may be content with hanging up his bowling shoes in a competitive setting and transition into more of a recreational mindset.

"That's my main goal," Maresca said. "It keeps me going, it keeps me active. I gives me that drive to continue."

Along with the triumph, bowling has also helped Maresca through difficult times throughout his life.

He lost his wife a couple of years ago and nearly lost his daughter after she suffered from a rare syndrome during her second pregnancy. Only two hospitals in the country treat the condition. One of them is Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix.

Through both hardships he stepped away from the game for a period of time. But he always found his way back.

Bowling is more than just a sport to Maresca. It's helped change his life for the better and gave him the ability to travel all over the world. Even as he grows older, it will always remain close to his heart.

"Bowling is my life," Maresca said. "Truthfully, it's all I know. If somebody would have told me I would be doing this for as long as I have, I would've told them they were crazy."

seven more years of competition to reach

gram, saw his career come to an end after leading the Jackrabbits to one of the best seasons in program history. Mesa finished as the No. 2 seed in the 6A rankings.

John Tanner and Mason Parker, two seniors on the Mountain View football team, led the way with the most receiving yards and tackles, respectively. The Toros finished 6-2 on the year, the best since 2015.

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