

Mesa sports scene had celebratory, tragic moments in 2017

By **Jason P. Skoda** - December 31, 2017



Jeff Kelley roars with excitement after sinking a 25-foot birdie putt on hole 18 to solidify Mesa's National Championship. (Aaron Webster/Mesa Community College)

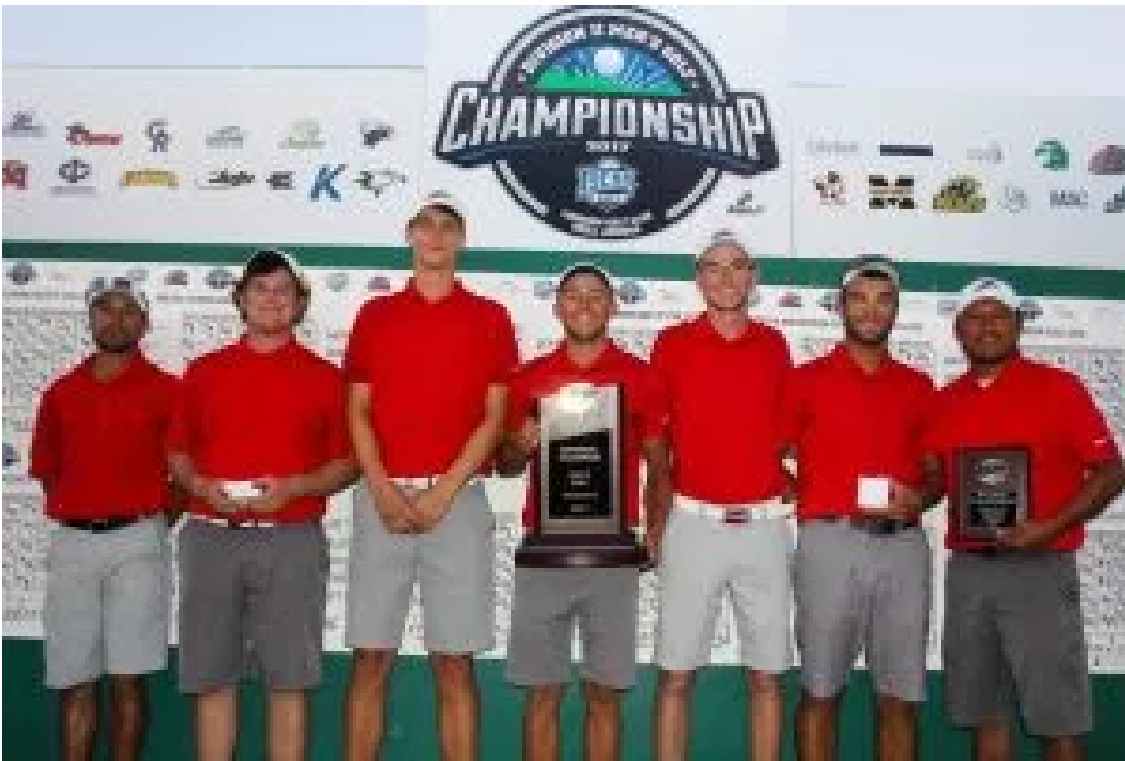
By the time the calendar flips to 2018 at midnight, there will be plenty of fireworks, celebrating, games played and a hopefully a kiss.

It will be reminiscent of the sport scene in Mesa over the last 365 days as there were plenty of each throughout the year.

The biggest celebration came at Mesa Community College when the boys golf teams won a national championship in May.

The Thunderbirds entered the final day down two strokes to Mississippi Gulf Coast but had 15 birdies in the final round at Longbow Golf Club to win it by five strokes.

It was the first national title in the program's history after finishing in the top 10 seven times since John Guerrero took over the program in 2005.



Mesa Thunderbirds men's golf team are national champions. (Aaron Webster/Mesa Community College)

MCC had five All-Americans with Dean Harpe, Jacob Guess and Jeff Kelley were first-team picks as Kelley finished off the tournament with a 25-foot putt to set off the celebration.

"They are great kids who kept grinding," Guerrero said at the time. "I am so happy for them and their families."

The Red Mountain football program had plenty to celebrate as well as the Mountain Lions ripped off nine straight wins to make the state semifinals for the second straight year.

Wrestling had one individual champion as Brock Doolen (182) helped Mountain View to a fifth-place finish.

Red Mountain's Trake Williams won the Division I pole vault title with a 16-foot effort and Skyline's Sierra Valdivieso won the discus title in DI with a toss of 140-05.

Red Mountain's Miles Hull won a diving state title, while Mountain View's Brian Rawlinson brought home the 100-yard backstroke to help the Toros to a second-place finish.

Skyline's Victoria Knapp won a state diving championship and Red Mountain's Olivia Grossklaus took the 100 butterfly for the second straight year.

It is hardly the totality of success stories in the state's third largest city, but it shows the level of success that Mesa sports programs can have in a single year.

There were also locals like Jake Barrett (Desert Ridge) pitching for the Diamondbacks, Mesa wrestling product Anthony Robles getting inducted into state and wrestling hall of fame, Dobson graduate Jody Johnston Ertz continued her soccer career with the women's national team and the Chicago Red Stars of the National Women's Soccer League, while Mesa's Kyler Fackrell (Green Bay) and Alex Barrett (Detroit) played in the NFL.

Desert Ridge product Alex Barrett made the Detroit Lions roster as an undrafted free agent. (Photo courtesy of detroitlions34515.com)

There was some tragedy along the way as well.

MCC assistant Ben McIvor died after a bar fight and the biggest story of the year made national news when former NFL All-Pro **Todd Heap** and his family faced a horrific incident after his daughter died in the family's driveway in Las Sendas after being hit by a car.

Heap opened up about the incident in early December in an exclusive interview with MyNewsMesa.

"It is something I am going to be dealing with my whole life," he said. "I am going to miss my daughter. There will always be that void and that pain, but I can still have joy in my life knowing where she is, and I know that I will get to see her again. That's what gets me through."

It goes to show no one knows what their future holds so as 2017 closes embrace the new year and cherish those celebratory moments.

Red Mountain coach Mike Peterson gets a kiss from his wife Bree after their semifinal loss to Chandler. (Darryl Webb/MyNewsMesa.com)

After all, sports are supposed to keep us active and happy. Something Red Mountain football coach **Mike Peterson** summed up in explaining how grateful he is to have the job he does.

"I'm just living the dream," Peterson said. "I get to run out here with the boys every week with goose bumps on my arms and with the hair standing up on the back of my neck. What a job. Where else would I want to be?"

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