

# Developing *Character* at Canyon State Academy

Lifting up troubled youths through the power of sports

Canyon State Academy is a division 2A school for at-risk young men, located in Queen Creek, Arizona. The teachers here operate from the premise that although some of their



Jeremy Ruesing has been at Canyon State Academy for seven years, and his passion for coaching is inspirational.

students may have made bad decisions, a positive, proactive approach can help these young men get on the right track. Canyon State's academic and athletic programs focus on improving the students' problem-solving

skills to better face challenges. It's a program that works, and BFS wanted to learn more

We interviewed assistant football coach Jeremy Ruesing, a health and wellness instructor at Canyon State who also helps with the weight training program. Canyon State has had considerable success in athletics, such as winning back-to-back state championships in track and last year had a football team that went 9-0 in the regular season. This year they moved up to the 2A division, and are 4-1 at the time of this writing. Other teams at Canyon State have achieved similar results.

In this exclusive interview, Coach Ruesing talks frankly about the approach they use to help these at-risk boys transition back into the public school system and the community. Their aim is to help turn troubled boys into goal-oriented young men.

**BFS:** First, give us an overview of the school.

**Ruesing:** Canyon State is a private, nonprofit program for at-risk kids. The campus is centrally located in a Queen Creek, which is one of the fastest growing cities in Arizona. Our campus includes a new sports complex, Olympic size pool, barbershop, auto shop, medical center, farm, and administration building. Our kids include those who have been in some type of trouble before and some who are sent here simply because their families are not able to take care of them for a variety of reasons.

**BFS:** What's a typical day like for a Canyon State student?

**Ruesing:** They have three classes a day, 90 minutes each; and every day they do a physical element, such as a three-mile run. They actively participate in what we call a guided group meeting in which each kid stands in front of his peers and tells them how he is doing, owns up to any mistakes made, makes commitments



to do better, and most importantly, is held accountable to the commitments made. After school they go to a vocational activity, such as computer business. Weekends are more laid-back. Those who are doing well in the program have more privileges, such as being able to go off campus to local community events or to local college football games.

**BFS:** What happens if a kid gets in more trouble at school, such as getting into a fight? How are they disciplined?

**Ruesing:** We have a component in our program called Concerns. If a kid gets in trouble, they are sent there and are required to complete academic and physical education elements before they come back into the classroom.

**BFS:** What else does Canyon State do to reinforce discipline?

**Ruesing:** We have uniforms, so everyone pretty much looks the same.



The Rams have a strong powerlifting team.

Its one thing we do to get our kids to realize that everyone is equal, no matter where you're from or what you've been through.

**BFS:** What's the biggest mistake coaches make when dealing with troubled kids?

**Ruesing:** Not holding them accountable for their actions. That's one of our biggest goals at Canyon State – getting kids to realize they are accountable for what they do. A large percentage of these kids have had a lot of adversity in their lives, here at Canyon State it is our job to help them acquire the tools necessary to persevere when faced with challenges.

**BFS:** Do you have a philosophy such as the “sandwich” technique, fitting one negative comment between two positives?

**Ruesing:** In a sense, but we try to give five positive comments for every negative comment. We flood them with positive remarks, even the smallest thing, such as telling them they did a good job spotting an athlete on a squat.

**BFS:** What about the teachers at a school such as Canyon State – is it especially stressful for them?

**Ruesing:** I think that when you make a choice to be a teacher with this population of kids, you are aware that there may be an essential component

missing from their childhood. Many of the kids are subconsciously looking to fill a void, usually a mom or dad. As a teacher, because we do interact with the kids daily the relationships that are established are priceless.

**BFS:** When was the last time you've worked 40 hours in a week?

**Ruesing:** I don't believe I've ever worked just 40 hours in a week. On a typical day I get to work at 7:00 a.m. and usually don't get home till 7 or 8 p.m., 10 or 11 on game nights.

**BFS:** Tell us about your workout program.

**Ruesing:** We use the BFS program, and the kids have really bought into it, along with the Be-an-11 program. We've had phenomenal success with these programs.

**BFS:** Is it important for the kids to see daily success in the weightroom?

**Ruesing:** Absolutely. Many of the kids are not use to demonstrating self-discipline and consistency. Both are needed to see results in the weightroom. Once they do feel success by getting physically stronger and faster, it gives an amazing boost to their self-esteem.

**BFS:** What are the special challenges with being a coach at Canyon State?

**Ruesing:** Having the consistency of being able to work with the same kids



The Rams football team has won back-to-back state championships.



for an entire season. Kids can exit and enter at any given time; it just depends where they are in their program. We can be four games into a season with an all-star quarterback, and suddenly he's gone.

**BFS:** With such conditions, what does this do to your playbook compared to other schools?

**Ruesing:** We have to keep it very simple. Not only that, every year we have to start from rock bottom because 90 percent of the kids who come out for football have never played the game before. We just try to teach them the fundamentals of football so we don't get them confused. But the biggest challenge is to get these kids to stop being

individuals on the field and get them to jell as a team.

**BFS:** Do you ever hear back from kids who have graduated from your school?

**Ruesing:** That's what keeps me going. Once you get that first phone call from a student who went through the program and is getting good grades and being successful, it's all worth it. Two kids who played for us last year and went on to play at 5A schools called us and were so excited about the idea of playing against each other in a 5A high school football game. That was neat.

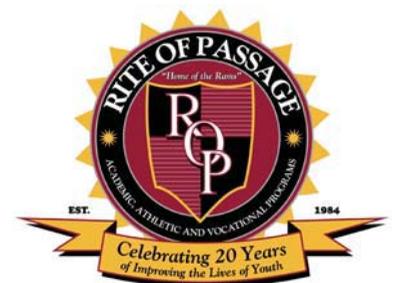
**BFS:** Do you run into any problems with preconceptions from other

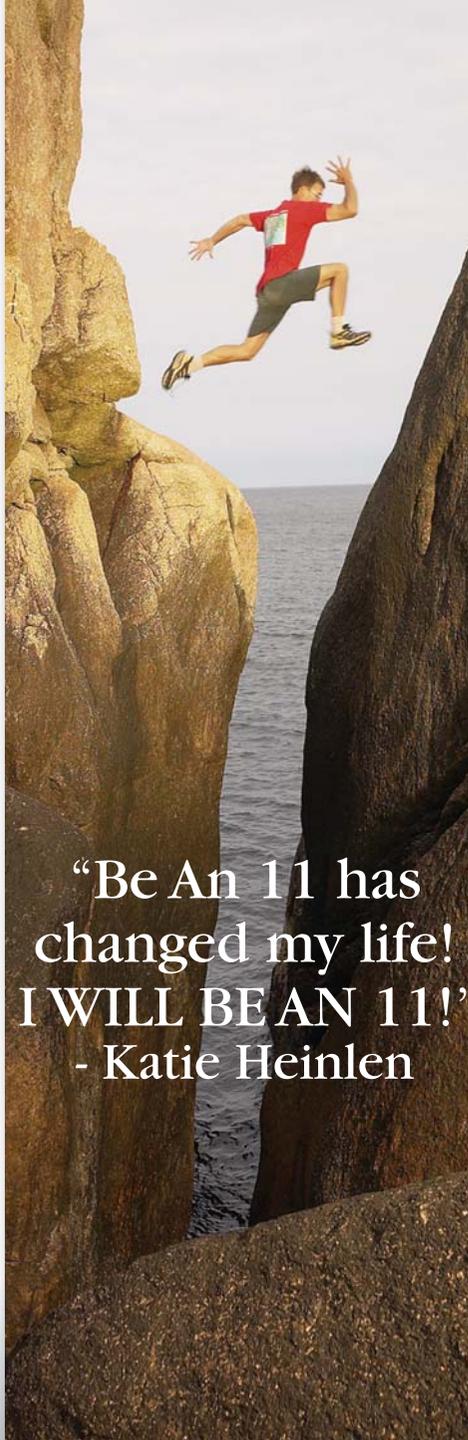
schools because of Canyon State's status as a school for at-risk young men?

**Ruesing:** We know there's the potential for our students to be labeled, so we go out of our way to stress sportsmanship – if you knock a kid down in a football game, you should be the first one to lend a hand and help them up. We frequently get positive comments from referees and parents after games about how well behaved our kids are. In fact, last year we won the sportsmanship award for the state of Arizona, and we're more proud of winning that award than winning any championship. For us it's not about winning football games, but playing with integrity and sportsmanship and winning the bigger battles in life. **BFS**



A variety of sports are available to students at Canyon State Academy.





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