

wrestling practice before, but I felt an extra buzz in the tiny, stuffy room above the high school’s basketball court.

At that time, Covington had his leg in a cast and was forced to hobble upstairs to visit his alma matter.

“That’s how you do it,” he said with enthusiasm, watching a student squirrel his way out of a hold.

The student later beamed with pride, knowing a UFC fighter gave him some praise. It seemed every student in the wrestling club wanted to hear his commentary.

After practice, Covington gave a quick pep talk, telling the kids he’d return to Oregon with the championship belt.

Sure, he’s viewed as one of the most hated people in UFC right now, but he gives back to the community where he got his start in wrestling.

Covington, 30, was born in California, but he talks about Thurston as the area where he grew up. He attended Thurston schools all the through high school. He learned to wrestle at Thurston Mat Club (then called McKenzie Mat Club).

“I went from a kid who was 100 pounds in freshman year, getting bullied and picked on. No one liked me. I was the nerd. It’s funny. The roles are reversed now. I was the nerd getting bullied. Now I’m the jock — everybody thinks — and I’m bullying everybody.”

Thurston gave Covington the foundation to launch into UFC, and his name still hangs in the gym. He holds records at Thurston High School for the most takedowns in a season (228). As a senior, he brought home the state title in 2006. He also helped the school bring home two conference titles.

Covington went on to wrestle for Oregon State University, where he was a two-time NCAA All-American and Pac-10 champion.

“I’d die for Thurston,” he says. “I’d go broke so Thurston could keep going.”

He’s been a donor to Thurston High School’s wrestling team, providing funds for materials and travel. Rather than requesting appearance fees like other UFC fighters, who he says charge upwards of \$5,000, Covington donates his time to meet with wrestling clubs when he’s in town —

which he’s done for schools in Eugene, Springfield and throughout Lane County.

“I’m going for free, I’m going to teach some kids some wrestling and I’m going to give them a talk,” he says about heading to Sweet Home. “This is Oregon. This is what I represent.”

You won’t find this on his social media because, Covington says, he believes that if you’re genuinely giving back, you shouldn’t be doing it for the attention.

“I’m fighting for the people who love me: Springfield, Eugene, 541, all of Oregon. That’s who I fight for,” he says.

THE MIND OF THE ULTIMATE FIGHTER

When Covington isn’t home in Oregon, he’s following the personality styles of some of World Wrestling Entertainment’s (WWE) greatest “heels” like “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and Ric Flair.

Being a heel isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It just means you see things differently and you’re following a different strategy to the same end goal that the good guy wants.

Ironically, for Covington, his narratives about respecting the president would have been something you would’ve heard the flag-waving Hulk Hogan say in the early 1990s as he wrestled Sgt. Slaughter, who betrayed the U.S. to become an Iraqi sympathizer as the U.S. was about to invade Iraq for the first time.

A big part of professional wrestling isn’t the action. It’s about making the audience care about whether they want to see you win or get beaten by the good guy. And that happens by talking and presentation.

Covington might not have inspired the youth of today like Hogan did. Instead, he’s pissed off a lot of people, but by doing so he has the attention of the MMA community.

The reason why Covington’s presentation comes across a bit like a wrestler is because he’s had the help of professional wrestler and fitness expert Stevie Richards. Richards

wrestled for WWE, Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW), and has learned from former WCW wrestler Raven, as well as ECW and WWE personality Paul Heyman.

When Richards joined the team, it wasn’t announced that he was there to work on Covington’s skills on the microphone. They had to keep that fact secret because if people knew that Covington was working with a professional wrestler, no one would believe anything he said.

In reality, though, Richards’ coaching is just like what any strength or conditioning coach would do in terms of giving suggestions on fight performance.

Richards says Covington is telling the truth and he’s not afraid to do what he wants to do — like supporting one of the most divisive presidents of all time.

Covington has the wins to back up the trash talking, too, says Dave Meltzer, who covers professional wrestling and MMA and runs the publication *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. Now that Covington has proven to fans that he can win, it’s OK if he loses on occasion — because he’s a “top guy,” Meltzer adds.

The welterweight division (with a fighter’s weight ranging from 156 to 170 pounds) in UFC is one of the hardest divisions because it contains athletes with a diversity of fighting styles, Meltzer tells *EW*.

“So many styles, so many killers,” he says.

But by combining trash talking and a stellar UFC record of 14 wins and one loss, Covington has gone on to climb to the division’s top UFC rank.

Meltzer doesn’t think Covington has changed the game of MMA but, instead, he’s used the power of social media to say things that cause outrage.

Covington’s plan was to address all of the “haters” — whom he calls “nerds” — on the internet with the hashtag campaign: #NerdBash2018.

“I started to think about it, and it was all these nerds and virgins,” he says. “They’re the people in their mom’s basement trying to play matchmaker on the internet. You’re all little Cheetos-eating dorks.”



SWEET TREE FARMS

Organics of the future.

541.246.8075 • 4097 W. I I TH AVE. • EUGENE

Do not operate a vehicle or machinery under the influence of this drug. For use only by adults 21 years of age and older. Keep out of reach of children.