In a makeshift gym in the middle of the Jordanian desert, a young man completes yet another set of pull-ups—anything to give him an edge over the competition. Yousef, a 15-year-old refugee from Syria, takes training seriously because he knows what wrestling and martial arts can give him: a new future.

Yousef fled his home in Dara’a with his parents and nine siblings four years ago when the city—ground zero in the Syrian civil war—became too deadly. In stark contrast, this small gym has become a sanctuary of stability and inspiration to hundreds of children and their families. It is here that Yousef sweats and sprints toward his dream: becoming a champion of competitive martial arts and a coach who helps other boys achieve greatness.

Yousef wasn’t always this determined. After he joined the roughly 80,000 other Syrian refugees in the Zaatari camp, Yousef fell into a deep depression. “I had no house, no friends, no place to play,” he says. The camp, and his prospects, felt bleak.

But when he and his brothers discovered the Mercy Corps-run youth sports program, he gained an entirely new outlook.

“Every day, I see young people surrender to despair and lose hope; I remember myself when I first arrived here,” Yousef says. But at the Mercy Corps youth center, “I learned that I can manage myself under pressure and be an active member in my family and new community.”

In addition to becoming a martial arts champion, Yousef wants to be a coach at the international level like his mentors, the Syrian wrestling phenomenon Mohammed Al-Krad and his brother, Farhan. The coaches encourage Yousef to not only practice take-downs and bicep curls but to also open up about his past, channeling his frustration into sports. They insist that the boys transfer the respect they give each other on the mat to everyone they meet.

Yousef says that winning wrestling matches at the youth center gives him a glimpse of what he can achieve beyond the barbed wire fences of Zaatari. “My first gold medal gave me confidence and determination to work even harder,” he says. “I know I will have a great future.”