

# **TRIBUTE TO THE OLDER GENERATION:** **MY FATHER-IN-LAW'S FIRST 90 YEARS**

*By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson*

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This past month I have been reminded of the stability a mature caring man can bring to his family. For 90 years my father-in-law, Ray Westphall, has been growing, learning, working and becoming the man he is today. I have known him for just 29 of those years but am thankful for the maturity and consistency he brings to all of us who are near.

Many of you who read this are wrestlers or related to wrestling. You wish to win and produce winners in sports and life. May I urge you to take special note of the older people around you and learn all you can from them. They have dealt with many battles and competitions and won and learned.

Dad Westphall grew up in the Detroit, Michigan area through the roaring 20's and the depression of the 1930's. In school he couldn't play football because his father prohibited it. He thought it was too rough. Hockey was okay. Figure that one out.

After high school his love for sports and baseball got him involved in a minor league team in Toledo, Ohio. He was progressing well as a 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman and batter. Talk of a major league team was becoming realistic.

But a bigger competition was brewing and was recruiting every talented promising young man. World War II had begun and a promising baseball career would not stop it. All three Westphall brothers signed up and joined a total of 9 million other US soldiers who fought in that war. He was assigned to Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois. Uncle Sam understood the value of sports and so developed teams to train some soldiers and entertain and motivate others. Dad played on the base's football team for a full season alongside All-Americans and NFL players of the day who were now also in military uniform. Their team was at the level of Big Ten teams and even NFL teams. They played the Universities of Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, and the Chicago Bears and others, winning more than losing. As a starting fullback he proved he could play ball with the best.

Because of his athletic experience and expertise his long-term assignment in the Army became that of rehabilitating soldiers who had been injured in battle. For 2½ years he worked in a large Army Hospital in Rome, Georgia. To this day he enjoys telling, and we enjoy hearing, stories of how he helped amputees and those who had been paralyzed walk again.

During the years of the war he met his wife, Audrey, was married and developed many friends, some of whom he is still in contact with today. As the war finally ended, his thoughts of baseball were now greatly altered. The war had used up the prime of his life as an athlete.

*This story always reminds me how blessed my brother John and I were to be able to pursue our wrestling all the way to 2 Olympics. You see, we both assumed we would be called into the military during the Vietnam War, as our 2 older brothers had been. When Congress went to a lottery numbering system for*

*the draft, John's number was too high to be called. I had a college draft deferral until graduation but a very low number. However, the draft was ended just a month or 2 before I graduated. John & I have always been thankful that our 9 years of international level wrestling was not sidetracked like Dad's baseball career was.*

My father-in-law's love for baseball and competition caused him to consider umpiring. Again he started in the minor leagues, traveling to many cities in the upper Midwest by train while his wife and first of 3 daughters made their home in Northville, Michigan. He was enjoying the game and progressing in knowledge and confidence. Many a time his stories of those days have brought us to laughter. But again, something bigger than the game called. While at home for a few days between games his 3-year old daughter asked her mother who the "strange man" was in the house with them. It was more than Dad could take. Seeing his daughter grow up and know him was now more important than a promising career in professional baseball. Working as a salesman in local businesses he spent the next many years raising and providing for his wife and daughters. Their faith and confidence in God blossomed and grew during this time. I crossed paths with their youngest daughter, Janet, at Maranatha Baptist Bible College where she was working and where I had just started coaching wrestling. I have always said Jan was prepared for all my wrestling through her dad's love for sports.

Again, still at the prime of a workingman's life something bigger than a career called. His wife had been fighting cancer for several years. She now needed extra special care. Who better to care for her than Dad? Retiring early, he stayed home and personally cared for her for many years. Newly related to the family and having provided 3 grandchildren, I watched a man care for his wife and family like no one else I have known. With the death of his true partner of 47½ years, he realized some personal medical needs of his own were imminent. Following the family tradition he had established, his daughters (especially Renee) helped in caring for Dad during 2 critical surgeries.

Today Dad watches every baseball game he can. He reminds me that sports are great for enjoyment, development and learning. But greater things will call and the wise man learns to balance and prioritize them.

Dad, HAPPY 90th BIRTHDAY TO YOU!! And to all those brave and wise men who have sacrificed so much of their hopes and dreams to win justified wars, I say a HUGE THANK YOU!! You made and continue to make it possible for many others to fully pursue their dreams, even all the way to the Olympics. Today many continue to set aside their dreams as they serve in Afghanistan, Iraq and many other places of the world. Thank You!

Dad, you won bigger matches than the Olympics. Thank you for your stability, your wisdom and your love for God and your family.

**\*Ben & his brother John now run Camp of Champs Wrestling Camps. Contact them at: Camp of Champs, PO Box 222, Watertown, WI 53094; Phone: 800-505-5099; E-mail: [ben@campofchamps.org](mailto:ben@campofchamps.org); Web: [www.campofchamps.org](http://www.campofchamps.org).**