

# INCONSISTENCY OF A YOUNG COMPETITOR:

## **My Sophomore Year**

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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My last article explained how I gained confidence to train for a National Championship. As a freshman at Iowa State University I watched my teammates work relentlessly until they were crowned National Champions. Now I was hooked. Could I break into the varsity line-up? Could I make a contribution to winning next year's Team National Championship? The success of our varsity wrestlers raised my hopes, motivation and willingness to train throughout the summer.

Ecclesiastes 7:8 gives the perspective of this article when it says:

*“The end of a thing is better than its beginning:*

*The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”*

To reach my goal there was going to be the need for patient hard work with a continual focus on the end goal. Many hurdles stood along the way, but I was anxious to get started.

During the spring of my freshman year freestyle practice was on our own. No coaches were in the room to guide and motivate us. Dan Gable our team captain led the way. I soon realized it was the hungry few that kept alive the regular afternoon wrestling ritual from 3:30 to 5:00.

The National Freestyle Tournament was in Waterloo, Iowa, close enough to get a ride with an upperclassman with a car. I didn't win a place, but competed well enough to receive compliments and encouragement from the upperclassmen that knew the Olympic style.

Dad secured a roofing job for my brother John and me that summer. John was a junior at U.W. Stout. There was plenty of time while working in the hot sun to talk wrestling with each other and then lift and run in the evenings. An old horsehair mat borrowed from our high school and placed under a backyard tree for shade provided a few wrestling sessions. It was not a summer of vacationing. I needed to make the team. John, I and our younger brother Dan, a junior in high school, pushed each other on every lift, every run and every wrestling session. We all wanted to compete at a higher level.

Returning to Iowa State in September, I continued daily workouts with my university team. I was bigger, stronger, and in shape to challenge for the 190# weight class. All-American Jim Duschen had graduated leaving that weight class open for the one who wanted it the most. Tryouts in November came down to Don Gillespie and me. A close, hard fought 8 minutes left me winning by a point. **I would start the season a member of the best wrestling team in America.** There were 2 questions to be answered: 1) Could I keep the spot in future tryouts? and 2) Could I contribute to the team and be a part of making them repeat champions?

Starting the season by winning 3 matches at the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Iowa State University Invitational Tournament was a great confidence booster. A trip to New Mexico and Arizona provided opportunity for a couple dual wins but then I lost in a tournament. The Annual Midlands Tournament in Chicago was a reality check that people wouldn't just roll over for an Iowa State wrestler. Russ Hellickson from the University of Wisconsin soundly defeated and eliminated me in the second round, 6-2. More than beating me he had out-horsed me, out-conditioned me and left me exhausted. A week later Bob Underwood of Southern Illinois pinned me in front of the Iowa State crowd. While riding with legs I had gotten too high and was pulled over and pinned. One mistake had been fatal. Truly that was the low point of my college career.

Knowing college wrestling, I am sure Coach Harold Nichols and Les Anderson discussed the future of me at 190#. But still they encouraged me personally. For most duals I was part of the team, being set aside a couple times when lower weights were adjusted to match better with opponents or to give them a break from cutting weight.

The key dual of the season was in mid-February at home with Oklahoma State. Everyone was at his proper weight. I faced the #1 ranked undefeated Geoff Baum. He won 3-2 and our team lost 17-16. I was a part of wrestling at its best but fell short of scoring for the team in a tight match. There was hope that I was getting there and more reason than ever to keep working.

The Big 8 Conference was a day to remember. Winning 2 qualifying matches, I now had earned the right to face off with Geoff Baum of Oklahoma State, still undefeated and ranked #1 in the nation. With no scoring in the 1<sup>st</sup> round I started the 2<sup>nd</sup> period on top and went to work riding and seeking the pin. Crossbody (leg ride), nearwrist and armbar had become my preferred way to control, wear out and occasionally pin my opponents. But would it work on the best? For 3 minutes I rode without scoring. Starting the 3<sup>rd</sup> period down I was fresh while Geoff was worn out from my ride. A quick wrist control and extension roll put him on his back for 2 reversal and 2 near fall. More riding and attempts to pin gave me 5 ½ minutes of riding time and 2 points (today only 1 point is given for riding time.) The final score was 6-0. I had not lost or even just barely won. I had dominated him. My teammates went crazy!

Two weeks later was the Nationals. A big question was who would be seeded #1? I was told that the coaches discussed the issue for some time. Now that Geoff Baum had been defeated others should be considered. Coach Nichols, the man of few words, listened and then presented me for #1, stating that I had beaten Baum soundly. The coaches voted and I became the #1 seed. (A teammate informed me of this, flaunting the fact that he knew the details.) I was shaken by it. I had not thought of myself as #1 yet. That should come later on the mat. I remember feeling incredible pressure. I couldn't get over the early season losses. How could one victory erase all that?

After a 1<sup>st</sup> round win I faced the #8 seed. Rust from Princeton defeated me just like Hellickson had at the Midlands. He took me down and rode hard, wearing me down and leaving me exhausted. The final score was 6-2. **But the question was still there – could I help my team win Nationals?** The long wrestle back trail began. I remember being told to “take a deep breath and go to work”. Wrestling back from that far takes several rounds. I was successful until the final round where Jack Zindel of Michigan State beat me by referee's decision. I finished 4<sup>th</sup> and our team won! Dave Martin 158#, Jason Smith 167# and Chuck Jean 177# were National Champions. I had played a definite part in our team's success.

The hard part was watching Geoff Baum easily win the National Title! But I now knew what it took to win. 12 more months of training could put me on the top. Again, my confidence and motivation rose dramatically. “I can win the NCAA's!” “Baum is beatable!” A year of hard training would improve my consistency that was so lacking.

A lesson learned from this whole season's experience is the need to keep your hope alive and be prepared. **Preparation must be coupled with a hopeful spirit. My coaches, teammates, family and daily reading of God's Word all helped me “major on how high I got on a good day, not on how low I fell on a bad day.”**

You will be inconsistent when you are young but hard work and preparation can improve your consistency. Keep thinking about the fact that you have been part way up “the mountain” and work to “finish the climb”. If you are inconsistent don't lose hope. Patiently keep working and building confidence and direction with each new step. Learn from your mistakes and move on to the next challenge. “Patiently keep looking and working for the end.”

The next article will be: “The Day I Quit and Won: My Junior Year.”

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