

# THE DAY I QUIT & STILL WON!

## **My Junior Year**

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

#26

Every young athlete and inspiring person will sort through a process of growth and preparation to reach their goals. This was truly the case for me. This series of 4 articles explains my 4 years of college wrestling and preparation for the NCAA Nationals. The 3<sup>rd</sup> year (my junior year) explains how close to the edge an athlete can be. The pressure, the distractions, the expectations can make or break you.

After easily defeating, Geoff Baum from Oklahoma State, the #1-ranked and eventual National Champion at 190#, 6-0 as a sophomore, I knew I could win Nationals. But knowing that and being ready to do it were two different things. After spring wrestling and lifting on my own and completing my second year of studies in architecture, I headed home to be refreshed with my family. A second summer of shingling roofs every day with my brother, John, gave us many opportunities to share our wrestling dreams and encourage each other. John being a senior at Stout State University in Menomonie, Wisconsin would have one last opportunity to win the NAIA Nationals. So far he had failed to place. He was hungry to lift and run so he could finish on top. For me the slogan “Beat the Bum” was placed on the chalkboard in our basement weight room. Every bench press, dead lift and squat was done to beat “the Bum” (Geoff Baum.) Our younger brother, Dan, would be a senior in high school and was hungry to win state. Dan was the youngest of 5 brothers and we all longed for him to achieve what none of us had. Clearly the three of us were motivated to work, so it was a good summer of working and training together. Though we would wrestle on 3 different teams the next year we worked like teammates for 3 months.

In August Coach Nichols and Dan Gable coordinated for me to train for two weeks with the National Team. Their training camp just happened to be at the University of Wisconsin Superior, which was 90 miles north of us. What an opportunity to rub shoulders with America’s best freestylers. I left the camp knowing there was a lot farther to go in wrestling but encouraged that I was at least competitive with them.

Back to Iowa State University in September renewed the routine of classes and daily hard wrestling practice. By November we were meshing as a team and Carl Adams (158#) and I were selected to be Co-Captains. Expectations were getting higher all the time. The questions of leading the team as well as being prepared to win my weight class were daily motivations to train extra hard. Coaches Nichols and Anderson and now Grad Assistant Gable set a great atmosphere for a bunch of young wrestlers. We had no returning Champions like previous years. No standout seniors. Would we be able to beat the Oklahoma schools or was the success of the 2 previous years going to be lost. I remember thinking of that often.

I must be ready for 2 duals with Geoff Baum and then face him at the Big 8 Conference and Nationals. But first it was Russ Hellickson in the Midlands. The fellow Wisconsin native who had graduated and was training hard for freestyle defeated me in the finals of the Midlands 5-4. At least I was competitive this time.

In the midst of our 17 duals I was able to get a lead on Geoff Baum and then win 7-6 in the away meet. At home it was a close 3-2. I was now ranked #1 and undefeated against University opponents.

What about Big 8’s? John tells people that the night before the competition was the most enjoyable day of my season. Arriving early at the Nebraska field house in Lincoln we descended to the locker room to check weight and get a brief workout. I was so preoccupied that I walked right by a wrestler from Oklahoma State who was bundled up and running laps in a hot training room. When we arrived in the locker room a teammate asked, “Did you see who that was?” My response was, “Who are you talking about?” The answer was, “The guy running with all the sweats – that’s Geoff Baum! I’ll bet he’s cutting down to 177#.”

I couldn’t believe it! After further investigation the coaches verified that indeed Geoff was moving down. I had not even thought of such a possibility. It shocked me a bit and for a while rattled my thinking. My goal of “Beating the Bum” was complete. I don’t think I had thought of much else. But I was now more mature than the previous year. My mind needed to focus on the several other quality competitors in my weight and

especially those I had not faced yet. I now needed to put my full attention on them. Winning the 190# class at the Big 8 Conference was easier, but our team finished 2<sup>nd</sup>.

2 weeks later it was off to Auburn University in Alabama for the NCAAs. Older brother Phil drove our parents down in his Volkswagen bug. They spoke of it for years. That was a long hard trip even for the most rugged of northern Wisconsin farmers. But their presence was a great encouragement to me.

I watched Geoff Baum win his second NCAA title, this time at 177# by defeating my freshman teammate Al Nacin in the finals. Then it was the finals for me with Vince Paolano of Syracuse University. After a scoreless 1<sup>st</sup> period we traded reversals in the 2<sup>nd</sup> period. The pace was fast. Vince was a strong, explosive, flexible competitor. With a second hard-fought reversal in the 3<sup>rd</sup> period I led 4-2 and was on top. My plan would be to ride hard, get riding time and try to turn him. That had become my strength and my pattern in many a match.

But Vince was not easily contained by the clamps of my near wrist, armbar and crossbody (legs) rides. Halfway through the 3<sup>rd</sup> period he reversed me and proved his own ability to ride. The pace was too fast. My lungs were burning. My stomach ached from the nervousness. I became conscious of the pain and put my head on the mat and grabbed his wrist just to contain his motion. He must not be permitted to break me down. That would hurt even more. **Then it happened. Conscious of the pain, I submitted. I told myself as clearly as if I said it out loud, “Ben, you are going to lose. You can’t keep going. You hurt too much to explode out for an escape. You are going to get beat!”** Apparently my lungs and my condition had failed. Any now my mind had fainted. Was there any reserve? How can you win when you give up?

Crouching under Vince’s pressure to ride I slowed way down to ease the pain. While keeping wrist control I prepared for the end of the match and the impending loss. What else was there to do? I had given up. It was really then that the long hours of training must have done their work. Just surviving the upperclassmen in the previous 2 years, the summer lifting, all the mile runs and sprints and the long talks on the roof – could they help now? Mentally I had fainted. Physically I was hanging on like Jacob wrestling the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32:24-32. Jacob would not let go until he got a blessing (verse 26.) Yes I, too, wanted God’s blessing. And that night I somehow wanted a win but didn’t see how.

An angle developed between Vince’s body and mine. **I felt an opening to roll. With his right wrist controlled I twisted to my left and extended my legs. He was thrown to the mat on the right. Keeping the wrist I turned to his hips and secured a reversal and then 2 near fall points before he could belly out.** I was now leading 8-4. My hopes rose again and with more exchanges of scrambles we finished with an 11-6 score. I had won. I was the NCAA Champion at 190#. Standing on the victory stand a few minutes later I knew of the battle Vince and I had been in. My stomach was so tied up I couldn’t stand straight and smile. There was more of a grimace than a smile.

Often I have thought of that match. “I quit, and yet I won.” How? There are various factors. Today I know that Vince was as tired as me. The pace was too fast for him also. He no doubt was struggling to keep going. Whenever we feel like that in a battle we should slow down and keep the best position and pace we can. When we can’t keep up a strong aggressive attack we need to adjust to a stable controlled pace but not stop looking for openings. That was a very important lesson for me to remember for future competitions as well as when coaching others. I have urged others to keep their hopes alive and to hang on for both God’s blessing and to win competitions. I pray the writing about these failures and successes will help others!

Carl Adams and I were National Champions as juniors. But the ache of Iowa State finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> to Oklahoma State would drive us to prepare our younger teammates for our senior year. I’ll tell that store next time.

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