

Inspired by a Higher Goal

My Senior Year in College

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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Training for my college senior year started 2 weeks after the Nationals as a junior. For 2 weeks I ate and caught up on sleep and my studies. By the end of it I felt fat, lazy and anxious to get a good workout again.

Lifting, some running and freestyle practices on our own were just enough. No coaches, no demands, just training because we wanted to and because another season would come before we knew it. Freestyle Nationals opened the door to the Pan American & Senior World Training Camps. This time they would pay expenses for me to train with the best wrestlers in America.

Arriving at home in June I spent another month and a half roofing with my brother John. He had graduated from U. Wisconsin Stout and was wondering if the Army would be asking for his services in Vietnam. I suggested he attend the National Training camps with me and test his wrestling skills at a higher level. Having only placed 5th at the NAIA Nationals his confidence was not that high. For weeks he said I was crazy. Then in early July he agreed to go. When it was time to fly to Miami, John paid for his ticket and was in the seat next to me.

For a full month we trained with America's best and then were a part of the World Team Trials. My fellow Wisconsin nemesis, Russ Hellickson, had won the Pan Am Gold and was ready to earn a World Bronze. Again he was too much for me. But John would not be denied. After training for a month he climbed the entire tryout ladder and made the World Team. As he flew to Sophia, Bulgaria for the World Championships, I flew home. (I'll have to tell John's story more fully in another article.)

I remember enjoying 2 weeks with Dad & Mom. After raising 6 they had just sent Dan, their youngest, off to preseason football at NIACC Junior College in Mason City, Iowa. Mom fed me real well and we talked a lot. I left refreshed. I was anxious to get back to Iowa State for my senior year of Architectural studies and to train daily with the hardest working wrestlers I had ever known.

Standouts like Carl Adams, Keith Abens, Rich Binek, and Al Nacin were anxious to train for a national title. They were all great workout partners. Joining us this time was a mountain of a man, the good-natured fun loving Chris Taylor. During the days of unlimited heavyweights Chris was the biggest and would become the best. He was 6' 5" and weighed 425 pounds. Yes, I said 425 pounds! I can't imagine how many times I have been asked, "You didn't wrestle him, did you?" My answer is: "Of course I did! Why not? Who else is going to? I was the next biggest man in the room much of the time." He presented literally a mountain to conquer. For a year and a half I plotted and picked away at conquering the Mount Everest Coach Nichols' recruiting had put in front of me. (I'll have to tell Chris' story more fully in another article.) I feel so blessed to have had all these men to train with on a daily basis for that entire season. Some were already top college wrestlers. Others were working to become National Champions before they graduated. And we all desired greatly to beat the Oklahoma schools and win Nationals after the previous year's 2nd place finish.

In late September I received a phone call from John. He had roomed with Gable on the European trip. Although John's performances were losing ones, Gable saw hope of John making the Olympic Team. And he saw in John a good workout partner for himself. Dan was a grad assistant at ISU and offered to share his apartment if John would come to Ames and train. After working a few weeks John packed and came down.

Consider the wrestling room Harold Nichols and Les Anderson had assembled. There were young first year wrestlers fighting to keep their hopes alive, there were experienced competitors beginning to believe they could win, there were returning National Champions, there was the biggest man I had ever seen, there was my brother with Olympic dreams and there was the newly crowned World Champion Dan Gable. When I see the big practice rooms today I wonder how 30 plus of us fit on the 1 and a half mats with padded walls on the third floor of Beyer Hall. The closeness must have added to our intensity.

Whenever I think of this setting it is like the epitome for training. Proverbs 27:17 says, “*Iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.*” Truly my teammates were iron that ground away to sharpen me and I fought back to sharpen them. It was a year to remember. Our first competition was the Southern Open Tournament in Chattanooga. With 7 wrestlers (including Gable & John) we won 5 weights, losing only to each other. That was also a great introduction to traveling with Chris Taylor. We were becoming friends and experiencing the attention of the crowds with him. When we got home we found that the rest of our team had won the Northern Open in Madison, Wisconsin. After three duals it was off to the Midlands Tournament. Again I met Russ Hellickson in the finals. By the narrowest margin I won by referee’s decision in overtime. I had finally defeated Russ!

Gable and John put their attention to freestyle. Their training intensified after returning from the great Tbilisi, Georgia Tournament in southern Soviet Union. Daily after the ISU team finished practice they would stay and go hard for 30 or more minutes. I wanted to be a part of that. So every day there was 1-½ hours of the hardest folkstyle training, a 5-minute break and then freestyle. People have often asked how I switched from college wrestling to freestyle so quickly. My answer is that all through college I was doing freestyle in the spring and summer and then my senior year “everyday”. Making the change in rules and emphasis on the back is hard for many. We changed scoring in our minds daily. It became as simple as putting on our headgear.

John and Dan were training mornings and evenings as well as afternoons. By mid February I sensed they were getting significantly ahead of me in freestyle. By then the idea of making the Olympic Team was also strong in my mind. I suggested to Gable that maybe I should set aside my folkstyle and pursue the higher goal of the Olympics. Dan simply said, “What makes you think you can make the Olympic Team if you can’t win the college Nationals. Keep your focus on winning the NCAA’s and there will be plenty of time to get ready for the Olympics.” That was sound advice that I clearly needed. After that the NCAA’s became a step/plateau to a higher goal. The NCAA’s were like setting up a “base camp” before heading up the peaks of the Olympics.

After a 17-1 team dual season and a team second at the Big 8’s we were off to the NCAA’s in Maryland. Carl Adams repeated as 158[#] Champion and Chris Taylor won heavyweight. In the finals I used a freestyle hiptoss against Emil Deliere of Princeton University to score 5 points. Emil was injured and unable to continue. I had won the 190[#] class by injury default. But, with the help of Bill Fjetland’s 5th, Rich Binek’s 3rd, Phil Parker’s 2nd and Keith Aben’s 2nd, Iowa State won the Team Title again for the third time during my 4 years. As co-captains that team title was truly a dream come true for Carl Adams and I!

How blessed I feel to have been part of that “run”. I experienced the building of momentum my freshman and sophomore years, the losing of it my junior year and the regaining of it my senior year. There was no way I could imagine how that momentum was going to catapult several of us to much higher levels.

Following are a few of the many verses that tell the way I felt when I graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Architecture 8 months later.

“But I have trusted in Your mercy; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.

*I will sing to the LORD, Because **He has dealt bountifully with me.**” Psalms 13:5,6*

*“The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places: Yes, **I have a good inheritance.**” Psalm 15:6*

*“But the LORD was my support. He also brought me **out into a broad place:***

He delivered me because He delighted in me. Psalm 18:18b-19

Every person’s development will be different and unique. It is my prayer that the telling of my story will encourage others to work as hard as possible, to learn from others and to pray for God’s help and blessing.

***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: info@campofchamps.org; Web: www.campofchamps.org**