

The Influence of Dads on Wrestlers

By Olympic Champion John Peterson

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How many times have you watched fathers coach their sons or cheer for them from the stands? Have you wondered what kind of influence those fathers had on their sons? Ben and I learned the importance of discipline and hard work from our father. Dad passed down many of his values to his six children more by example than by talking about it. He was always so supportive of his five sons in our different sports pursuits. I have fond memories of coming home from football games or wrestling matches and discussing the evening's events over a bowl of cereal in the kitchen. That was our father's nightly ritual, usually a bowl of cornflakes before watching the evening news to catch the weather report and the sports round up. One regret that I have is that we did not start Camp of Champs father/son camp until the year after his sudden death in 1990. He would have loved to watch the dads with their sons at camp fishing together, playing games against one another, and, of course, spending time on the mat together.

I am very thankful that my wife Nancy has always had a love for wrestling and the people surrounding it. We have seen two of our three sons wrestle through grade school, high school and college. Our youngest son was in first grade at the time we started father/son camp and is now a junior wrestling in University. It has been great having all the boys, yes, even the one who played "the round ball game," work at camp! What a great experience it has been watching the boys grow and learn through the sport of wrestling. Many of the tough lessons that Joshua, our middle son, learned while wrestling for Coach Wayne Baughman at the Air Force Academy are serving him well as he serves in the military.

Mark Churella has impressed Nancy and me with the relationship that he has with his sons. As a volunteer high school coach he mentored all three sons through their early years of wrestling. I asked him how he let his sons know that they were secure in his love for them, when they didn't achieve the result they were looking for. His response was, "I told them that I loved them and I really meant it." He said that wrestling helps teach that there are no entitlements. Just because your father was a good wrestler does not mean that you will be good. You learn that hard work pays off and that faith, family and representing yourself well are what really matter.

There are many dads who have been great examples for the wrestling community. I have observed another one for several years from a distance and have always been impressed with his coaching success. How can you not be impressed? As a head coach he has won 17 Wisconsin team titles. He coached his team to 12 titles in the last 13 years. Lewie Benitz graduated from the University of Wisconsin Stout two years before I entered that school so I had an extra motivation for observing his career. But as impressive as his coaching stats are, the thing that impresses me more is to watch him coach with his sons. He and his son Scott have been co-head coaches at Wisconsin Rapids for the last five years and have won five team state championships together! His son Shane has also been a part of the Raiders coaching staff for eight years.

I have often heard one of my wrestling mentors, Dan Gable, say that our primary job as fathers is to help our children to become contributing members of our society. Lewie Benitz and his wife Joyce have done that. They have three children and 9 grandchildren. Like many coaches wives Joyce rarely misses a wrestling event. Their oldest son Scott teaches and has been a co-head coach with Lewie for the last 5 years and will take over as head coach next season. Shane runs a business and is on the coaching staff. Their daughter, Vicki, who's husband wrestled in high school & college, runs the "business" of raising five children. Lewie is thankful for how the sport of wrestling has helped in the parenting process. In a recent conversation he expressed a fondness for the great memories looking back on the years of coaching his two boys through high school.

We talked briefly at the state tournament in February. Our 189-pound wrestler had lost a heart breaking overtime match in the semifinals.

As the boys, we each were coaching, were getting ready for their wrestleback matches, I asked Lewie if he had any secrets on helping wrestlers after a devastating loss. The timing of my question could not have been worse. His 103 pound wrestler, who was wrestling with an injury since the regional tournament, had lost a one point match in the semis and had just finished with a heart breaking 2 point loss in the wrestlebacks. Just as a dad hurts for his own son, so Lewie's heart was aching for his wrestler who was feeling the harsh pain of defeat. Graciously, he indicated to me that he would love to share his thoughts on that subject at a later time.

That time came in our phone conversation. He told me that he has always tried to coach the wrestlers as if they were his own sons. When his son Scott suffered a devastating loss at the state tournament as a senior, Lewie spent some quiet moments together with his boy under the bleachers as someone's malt came dripping down on their faces. At that time the Individual State tournament took place in the building we affectionately call "the barn." Lewie said, "in those moments you do not need to give instruction, you just spend quiet time together."

Talking with Coach Benitz and Mark Churella gives you a good reminder that there are no secrets to success. It all comes down to hard work and practicing common sense principles. When I asked Lewie for advice on dealing with fathers who find it difficult to balance coaching and being a dad, his response was to share an example of a state champion's dad. Lewie had to sit down with that dad earlier in the son's high school years and ask, "Do you trust us to be the coaches of your son? There can only be two coaches in the corner." This dad responded positively to that direct communication between coach and dad. Lewie said that as long as we know we are on the same page, we will have less misunderstandings between us. That just takes good communication between coaches and parents. Lewie uses those communication skills as he works as a coach for the Wisconsin School Boy national dual team. He and one of his wrestling grandsons get to spend some special time together.

After 41 years of coaching at WI Rapids, Coach Benitz is stepping down as head coach. But not much will change. Lewie will still be there working with his sons. I am sure the tradition of tough wrestlers coming out of the Wisconsin Rapids High School wrestling room will continue. Scott will be handing down the same values to his own sons and wrestlers that he learned from his dad, and the fond memories will continue.

***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**