

BE NOT ASHAMED OF SMALL BEGINNINGS

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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In the next several issues of this column I plan to tell the story of how my brother John and I came from a large family in a small town way up north and ended up competing for medals in 2 Olympics. Many have encouraged me in telling this story and if you are encouraged in some special way by reading it then it will be worth telling. And, of course, I would love to hear your reactions. If you miss an issue, check for them on our website www.campofchamps.org.

Everyone's life story is different. There are no two of us alike. We may have many similarities, but God made each of us differently. We each make decisions on our own and as a result, we each walk different paths. Following is a description of some of the paths John and I have walked.

Many think John and I are twins. That is not the case. Actually, John is a year and 8 months older. However, we spent a lot of time together playing and working on our Dad's 80-acre farm in the northwest corner of Wisconsin, known by the locals as Indian Head Country. We attended the same 2-room country school and, being 1 year different in grade, we were taught by the same teacher most of our elementary years.

We did farm work together, built forts, a calf barn, snow tunnels, a shop in our basement, wood piles, hay piles, imaginary barns, 4-H entries and much more. Yes, we did a lot of building together from the very beginning. It was a good healthy atmosphere that our parent's provided for our growth.

John and I most often attended Sunday School together each week and then one week of summer Bible School. We always said a week of summer Bible Camp was the highlight of our year. Camp gave us a great appreciation for the value of getting away for an intense period of focused training and prepared us for US Wrestling Team Training Camps and now for 31 years we have been training hundred's of young wrestlers at Camp of Champs[®].

Dad and Mom had not traveled more than 200-300 miles from their birthplace and our home until their children's sports activities caused them to stretch their own wings. The oldest, Phil, brought the family to Madison, Wisconsin, as he attended the University for 4 years, playing football for the Badgers as a pulling guard, offensive line captain and All Big Ten Academic Player. Tom, next in the line-up, enlisted in the Army and got our family thinking of far away places like Korea where he served for much of his 3 military years. Becky brought us to Chicago where she received her nurse's training. John and I would travel the nation and then the world with our family following us to Chicago, Auburn, Maryland, Munich and Montreal. Dan followed me to Iowa State University in Ames, IA and then he stretched our view to Colorado. But before all this traveling would begin we were busy and mostly content to be together right there in Comstock, Wisconsin.

Phil was an athlete from the start and a true competitor. As soon, and as often, as he could he would throw a ball. He was 5 years older than me and very mature for his age. We pretty much had to do whatever he said. To be honest, John and I didn't always appreciate it when he made us hit the ball to him. He would stand in front of the barn to keep our wild hits from going too far. Then after we'd had enough, we hit it as far as we could over the barn. Then while he went hunting for the ball we disappeared. Of course, we knew we would have to pay for that later.

Phil set the stage for our athletic competition and made it fun for us for a good while. We still recall with fond memories the "real" baseball field he developed in our back yard while he was in middle school. The field had a backstop, 2 dugouts (John and I were only old enough to help dig using an old spoon),

bleachers, press box and a raised pitcher's mound (because it was on a very definite hillside that hid home plate from the outfield!) Phil's "build-out-of-whatever-materials-I-can-collect" mentality came to an end when he sought to add lighting to the field so night play would be possible. He got a shock and dropped everything, running to the house hollering "I am dead! I am dead!" One fall day while he was gone, John, Dan and I got tired of chasing our 1 or 2 balls over and over. We decided the nearby apple tree, which had apples we could never eat, would supply us with pails full of balls for batting practice. Of course when we were done there were smashed apples everywhere. It never entered our minds that Phil would be horrified to see his field in such condition. Needless to say, we reused our pail and cleaned up all the pieces.

Next was basketball. Being 6 miles from school or a park we had to build our own court. What better place for winter basketball than the haymow of our 80-foot dairy barn. As soon as the cows consumed enough hay we cleared off an end and stacked the remaining bales to the roof. Phil mounted a backboard and rim that extended out from the wall for lay-ups. On the other side of the barn the backboard was nailed right up against the wall. We spent many a Saturday and Sunday afternoon playing from lunch until supper. Since one rim was next to the wall, fighting for rebounds knocked out the wall boards and then the floor boards. Soon the floor was patched and uneven. No wonder we never learned the smoothness needed to excel at that game. But we learned "barn ball" very well.

Then when Phil got serious about high school football he had to make a field. He looked at Dad's freshly cut hayfield and said, "All it needs is lines!" A lawnmower took care of that just fine – the only problem was mowing it. Dad needed the hay to grow back for the cows to eat so our football fields were usually short lived and had to wait until the next time Dad had it mowed.

Finally, Phil made a weight room. This is where he changed us from boys playing games into men working to rise above the crowd. Starting with a York barbell set, he made a bench out of old wood and padded it with vinyl and stuffing from the back seat of an old car. The bench had brackets to hold the weights between lifts and catch the weight in case we were lifting alone and couldn't get it up. A lat-machine using old barn cleaner pulleys worked great. An isometric rack and full squat rack were also made from wood. We used them for years. By today's weight room standards it was crude at best, but this was before any of the schools had weights. We may have had the best weight room in the county or even all of northern Wisconsin.

This may seem like an unlikely background for Olympic Champions. But I tell it because I want each of you, no matter what your age, to be reminded not to downplay or discredit your own small beginnings and difficulties. We learned to make the most of each situation and desire. Phil learned it first and then passed it on to us younger ones. I believe this is part of the true heritage our parents gave us.

Our parents taught us to look for a better day and they looked for and worked for that day themselves. Through each of our disappointments and joys, tragedies and successes, we were shown how to keep a confidence in God and keep adjusting to life's opportunities. Today, we wonder how people come out of ordinary places to succeed. I believe it is most often because they gained a hope that kept them, and others around them, going. Don't be ashamed of small beginnings and don't lose your hope but seek to learn how far your God-given talents will take you.

***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**