

A YEAR OF DABBLING & DELAY

By Ben Peterson

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My recent articles have expressed some of the early events that were definite factors in preparing John and me for the rigors of Olympic training, wrestling and competition. In life it is often the waiting and the delays that become key factors in major successes years later. I believe that was the case with us. We learned how to rehabilitate and wait, yet mature and advance.

After breaking my leg in 7th grade there was a long period of recovery. 5 weeks in traction and then 6 more weeks in a full cast trapped me in bed for a full 11 weeks. The right leg was a pitiful sight when the doctor first cut the cast off. You have never seen a weaker looking spindly leg. But it was a great sight to me. I was now free to stand and walk on crutches!

Rehabilitation meant working with 2 beanbags made by my mother, one light one to start with and a heavier one when the leg got stronger. At age 12, it was my first “leg extension machine.” It was simple and worked in our kitchen. Sitting on the kitchen counter with the beans hanging over my ankle, I extended the leg until it was thoroughly exhausted. Before long, the bags were strengthening the other leg also.

It was almost a year before that leg was ready to run and play. So, as an 8th grader basketball was given a try. Although I had plenty of height for my age, coordination was not back yet. Practicing all year and getting to play only 2 minutes of the final quarter of the last game of the season confirmed that no coach would be recruiting me for basketball.

That same year I was able to dabble with wrestling a bit just as John had the year before. Joe Hegenbarth was the junior high math teacher and the first wrestling coach at Cumberland High School. He had recruited and been the first coach for our older brothers Phil and Tom. Coach Hegenbarth was not coaching in the high school any more. (He would return as the Head Coach for Cumberland High School years later and eventually be inducted into Wisconsin’s George Martin Hall of Fame for Wrestling.) For 2 weeks the wrestling mats were put on the stage of the old junior high gym. Coach taught wrestling moves in P.E. classes and after school practices with an intramural tournament to end the 2 weeks. I wrestled one match and won.

Being a year older than me, John could begin football as a freshman. His 95# body was strong, quick and aggressive and a position at half-back seemed the most likely for him. But with many other boys bigger and stronger than John, he took a beating more than he was ready for. Soon his right knee was swollen and out of commission. After draining it a couple times (which John later felt was a mistake) the doctor realized this would take significant time to heal and needed to drain on its own.

By the time wrestling season was to begin he was told, “You better let that knee rest and heal or you may never play varsity sports again.” John took the doctor’s advice. He always says he could have been the varsity 97 pounder from the very beginning. However, he does not regret waiting. He learned the importance of protecting his “wrestling machine” and when it was injured he learned the value of rest, ice and rebuilding muscle strength.

Watching our older brothers wrestle, along with many matches in the hallway and haymow, had prepared us for the basics of the sport. We were looking forward to the next year of

high school wrestling. One match was enough bait to hook me. John had a similar experience in 8th grade also. With his short and smaller stature, wrestling was definitely his choice.

Our dabbling and delays were important steps. There was hunger for competition when the door to begin was finally opened. There were many opportunities to remember the value of protecting ourselves. Years later, being just under the heavyweights in size, we trained with the biggest around – the unlimited heavyweights (Chris Taylor at 425# was the ultimate). There was a fear coupled with respect that gave us the savvy to attack but also protect ourselves and even plead for mercy when needed.

When the injuries came and we found ourselves in rest-ice-rehab mode, we experienced learning by watching without participating and longing without losing hope. Competing to age 30 and beyond had its own challenges. Patience and adjusting permitted us to extend our careers. We were challenged with the reality of Isaiah 40:31, *“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”* As young Christians, we were learning to trust and honor God and “not faint.” We were learning to discern when to soar at an eagle’s pace, when to run at a sprinter’s pace and when to walk at a gentleman’s pace.

We urge you to learn patience and wisdom while caring for your body – your wrestling machine! If there are injuries or reasons to wait, do so with purpose and intensity. Then resume slowly and build up the pace as you are ready. In time it can all fit together, both on and off the mat.

***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**