

## **2 STEPS FORWARD - 1 STEP BACK**

**By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson**

**#39**

*In these articles you will read of experiences that brought my brother, John, and me from an 80-acre dairy farm in northwestern Wisconsin to 2 Olympics. If you have comments or questions let me know. I pray this will in some way encourage others to reach for the very best.*

Preparation for my junior year and John's senior year of high school began in the spring of the year. With the wrestling season over and us not involved with baseball or track, we began meeting in the basement weight room three afternoons a week. The old wood bench which we still have and the burr weights were kept busy.

Our older brother, Phil, arrived for his final summer of training before his senior year playing football for the Wisconsin Badgers. His presence added to the intensity. John rose to the occasion with definite new maturity and focus. Our younger brother, Dan who was going into 8<sup>th</sup> grade, joined the summer lifting sessions, but when other interests came up, he and I would often leave the weight room.

To John and Phil, lifting, running and hitting our homemade blocking sled was the priority. They missed less than a handful of sessions all summer. Hard summer training would put them a step ahead. Phil spoke of starting at pulling guard for the Badgers, graduating in the spring, serving in the army (because of the Viet Nam war draft), and then attending law school. John spoke of being a pulling guard on the Cumberland football team, state wrestling champion at 154# and attending college. Older brother Phil was guiding and encouraging John's goals. Our mother watched this with delight. I was helped by this talk, but wasn't mature enough to be totally focused on it yet. It would be another year before that would come about.

I recall our Coach, Jack Walsh, drove us to Coon Rapids, Minnesota to see a Greco-Roman tournament that summer. We met Allen Rice who was instrumental in organizing this Pam American tryout. My, it was strange to us, but also very memorable. Their techniques amazed us. We couldn't believe the skill, timing, strength and intensity. I have never forgotten that day. It was a huge eye opener to the level of competition wrestling could provide for us. We talked of reaching that level.

Phil went off to college and stepped through his personal goals, but was disappointed with a lackluster Badger football season. John and I started with the Cumberland football season. As a co-captain, John improved his leadership skills and often led players to do extra training. In the end, it would only produce 1 win and 7 losses. John's gutsy determination as an offensive guard and linebacker came out in one game where he suffered a concussion and couldn't remember the plays. He kept asking others what he should do on each play. When someone told him he should sit out a few plays, he instructed us all not to say anything to the coach. We were to tell him (John) what to do and keep playing. John never missed a play. Needless to say, the coach was not happy with us when he found out about John's condition. My play as an end, both on offense and defense, was less impressive. I can only remember 3 passes I caught all season. When I did catch a pass for a key score I was called for illegal receiver down field. John complained bitterly to the official in my defense but to no avail. I was not much use to a team that needed to find ways to move the ball.

The wrestling season came with renewed hope. Our 7-2 record from the previous season and a lot of returning starters with good records made Coach Walsh and John look at extra training ideas to stretch us to another level. I remember running laps around the gym before wrestling practice and sprints in the long hallways after practice.

The basketball team didn't like that we were allowed to run around their practice area while they did early shooting, especially when we took a bouncing ball in stride and made our own shots. The whole thing caused tension between the teams. One day, John took an in stride shot, (I think he made it), but used the ball from Jim, one of my friends and classmates. Jim was not happy. He went after John in a

street-fight way. John immediately tossed him in a wrestling move. The next day John apologized to Jim and I told him attacking John was not smart. There was no way he could win. But maybe he did win...we left the balls alone after that and talked to the basketball players in more respectful civil ways.

John started the after practice sprints on his own. Then he invited and persuaded the rest of us to join him. At first, we protested. Then when we saw value on the winning column several of us joined him regularly. John was learning and exhibiting to us two characteristics of leadership:

- (1) Determination to train hard extra on his own
- (2) Inviting and encouraging others to join with him in extra hard training.

This was the beginning of my style of training hard and finishing in a frenzy. That would be a valuable asset all the way to the end of my 16 years of competition. I would lead many others to do this sprinting as well, but I learned it that season. This was a step forward.

Wrestling at 154#, John was 13-1 in duals with 5 pins including a 4-0 win over Edgell of Unity. We believe John was Invitational Champ, Conference Champ and Regional Champ. Wrestling at 167# my dual record was 12-2 with 6 pins (John always says heavier wrestlers are easier to pin.) I was equally successful in the Cumberland Invitational, the "Heart of the North Conference" and the WIAA Regional Qualifier. This was all a big step forward. Our team finished 9-5 on duals for the season.

The clamps would be tightened in the WIAA Sectionals. The top 2 would go to state. After early round wins we both lost in the semis. A true wrestleback for 2<sup>nd</sup> would give us a trip to Madison. Wrestling Edgell of Unity again, John stumbled and lost by one point. A bitter lesson was learned. **Earlier wins don't count later on, and a seemingly easy win can become a fight for your life when all the marbles are at stake.** John finished 3<sup>rd</sup>. He was devastated and questioned for months if he should even attempt wrestling in college. As narrowly as John lost, I was able to win my wrestleback. Breaking a tie with a final seconds stand-up escape gave me second place. I have always said that John exhibited to me, his younger brother, how to train for state competition that year. He led us to the door, pushed me through and fell backwards himself. I was through the door and heading to state. But I felt alone and like I was hobbling on one foot. John tried to be positive and get me ready. I could tell he was hurting badly inside.

The next Friday, I wrestled 2 matches at State and was pinned both times. Rich Hinebaugh of Monroe was one of them. He placed second. I would see him again next year. Both losses showed me a whole different level of wrestling which I was not ready for. I was not ready for the constant barrage of moves. They wore me out and then turned me over for the fall. I was not able to defend myself. Days later I would be reminded and motivated that more intense lifting and sharper techniques of my own would be needed to compete at state next year. These high schoolers were clearly a step ahead. But now I had seen and felt what was needed!

This season had many lessons. John and I had increased our strength, technique, records and confidence significantly, but it was not enough. Winning is seldom easy. **Losing was devastating after a long year of training and dreaming of victories.** Winning was not automatic. We personally experienced that losing was no fun at all. John would debate and struggle for weeks whether it was worth wrestling or playing football on a college level. His motivation to train extra had diminished significantly. After a couple weeks of rest and thinking, I was in the basement lifting with a new and clear purpose – next year's football and the State Wrestling Championship. I had another year to see what could be accomplished with the talents God had given me? I would only know if I trained harder and wiser using what we had learned from the previous season. **We were learning that *two steps forward and one step back* are better than no steps at all.**

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