

The Art of Keeping Hope Alive

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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No two people take the exact same path to excellence in any endeavor. Each of us comes with different perspectives and needs, and is affected differently by many of the same events. This is true in the development of wrestlers. My brother John and I each had unique experiences on our way to Olympic successes. I am seeking to communicate our experiences to encourage other young athletes, not to tell them how they must progress.

This article picks up at the spring of my junior year in high school. John was completing his senior season with significant disappointment. He lost by one point in his last match to qualify for state. The unforgiving qualifying steps left him devastated. John recalls floundering for much of the spring and summer, questioning the value of playing sports on a collegiate level. His disappointment came out in a lack of motivation to lift and run throughout the spring and summer like he had so faithfully and intently done the previous year. He stated repeatedly, "There is no reason for me to try college football – I am too small. There is no sense in wrestling in college - I couldn't even qualify for high school state competition." *Clearly John had lost hope.* Instead his focus was put on graduating and earning money to pay upcoming college bills.

As we look back, we know John was still very hungry to compete, but he was struggling to keep his hope alive. In contrast, I was given a huge boost at that point in my junior season. Following John's footsteps all season I gained a definite intensity and love for wrestling. At the state qualifying door John brought me right to the threshold, pushed me through and fell backward himself. The door was slammed shut and he was left out. In spite of his disappointment, he showed his pleasure in my qualifying. Standing in the background John encouraged me at state where I wrestled 2 matches but got totally outdone by each opponent before they pinned me. Clearly I was not yet ready for that level.

When my hope needed another boost, our oldest brother Phil stepped in. (He had qualified for state as a senior after only 2 years of wrestling.) He would soon graduate from the University of Wisconsin with a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science. He had been the starting pulling guard for the UW Badger football team and had earned "All Big 10 Academic Honors." Phil told me I could win the State Championship at 180# the next year if I would train all spring and summer. His words meant a lot to me as an impressionable high school junior.

The intensity of Phil and John that had been too much for me the previous 3 years I now embraced. My hopes were high and it made sense to follow their lifting and running routines. Although Phil made the weight bench and bought all the weights, I really took ownership of them as well that spring. It became "our" weight room instead of "his."

When Phil arrived home from Madison with a newly earned degree and special football honors, I expected him to continue his previous year's lifting routines. I was excited to join him, but was disappointed. Phil had a new interest – Law School! Reading of law books in preparation for Law School entrance exams began in earnest. With John too discouraged to keep training and Phil in his books, I was left to motivate myself. This was a very valuable test of my personal resolve to train in the off-season. It would have been so much easier to have joined John and Phil the previous year. I remember scolding myself for the immaturity and lack of commitment I exhibited during the previous summer. But there was no sense in crying over spilled milk. That time was past. There was still a whole summer ahead to gain strength and maturity and reach for my own goals. I decided to keep working and keep my hopes alive!

Mom made some simple comments of encouragement to me and also to Phil. Her logic: It would be weeks before Phil needed to report for a period of military service during the Viet Nam era. Law

School would be after that. Mom suggested, “Maybe Phil could help Ben even if he is not lifting himself.” Within days, Phil was joining me in the weight room to guide my weight exercises, and coach me through hitting his home-made wood blocking sled in the back yard. (I had become strongly focused on playing football in college as well.)

Before going to work at the area canning factory at 11:00 a.m., I wanted to complete my morning training. Phil read his law books in the quiet of the night and slept in late. This caused some tension. My early wake-up calls didn’t always find a welcome response. But I recall him regularly getting up and meeting me in our basement weight room and in the back yard to hit his wood blocking sled. Phil came day after day, with complaints at first, but always with enthusiasm and encouragement before we were done.

During the Viet Nam war, full-time students were given a “draft deferral.” Upon Phil’s graduation, we all expected him to be quickly told to report. Throughout the summer we waited. It was not until late summer he received word to report in late September. Boy am I glad Uncle Sam delayed his call! This permitted Phil to personally guide me in one of the most intense summers of training I ever experienced in my 16 years as a competitor.

When hope is lost or delayed, we may face all kinds of set backs. Proverbs tell us we may even face sickness:

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick,

But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.” Proverbs 13:12

Our hearts lose energy when we lose hope. But when hope is strong an individual can drive through to the greatest of heights. Gaining a hope and confidence is essential for us to really commit ourselves to a demanding task. To stay at the task hope must be repeatedly refueled, especially when disappointment comes in to play. John’s previous drive was lost when he could not see his future in wrestling developing. My hope was fueled with a state qualification even though I lost badly at State. Phil’s encouraging comments set me on fire and his summer guidance helped keep that fire hot.

What goals and responsibilities do you need to keep a strong dose of hope for and what young junior can you inspire?

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