

The Match of a Life Time!

Or

Pinned at the Top!

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

#47

To a high school wrestler a record of 28-0 is significant. Often it doesn't last long. If it comes in a tournament than it may be a matter of an hour or 2 before the next match puts that perfect record at risk. That unblemished record during the Wisconsin State Tournament of my senior year in high school could be capped with a Championship match or ended with a loss. My semifinals win had been a hard fought somewhat fatiguing match, but I had 4 to 6 hours to rest and prepare for the match that could put a proper lid on the season.

My family was all watching except Tom, he was in Korea with the U.S. Army. Older brother Phil chose to sit in the high bleachers. I couldn't quite answer why he was up there and not with our parents, sister Becky and brothers John and Dan. But there are a lot of things a senior in high school doesn't understand about a big brother who is a University of Wisconsin graduate, football team starter and now Army soldier in training wondering if he will be sent to Vietnam.

The State finals match began against Rich Hinebaugh from Monroe who was also undefeated with a 26-0 record. He had pinned me at state in the 1st round the previous year on his way to finishing second. But I was determined not to let that happen again.

Aggressive but protected attempts at takedowns were tried by both of us. Rich was a mature leader in his school. He was a good student, disciplined and the son of a minister. This background would get him into the Air Force Academy. He was too seasoned and mature to expose himself to my takedown attempts.

Toward the end of the first period I got Rich in a vulnerable position and threw him to his back. Using his experience and savvy he landed out of bounds. No points were awarded. A "sly fox" had escaped me for the first period.

The 2nd period I started on the bottom. A wizzer had become common for me. I had confidence with it both for defense on the feet and in getting an escape from the bottom. Rich rode with his right arm strongly around my waist. This riding position felt like I could use the wizzer on him, so I did. Pulling slightly away and hooking my left arm over my opponent's right arm I secured the wizzer. Continuing to work the move, I pulled my hips out from under him and began to tripod. My hips were soon free. I felt ready to break away for an escape. But, with so much freedom of hip movement, why not go for a reversal instead. I moved back into Rich and stepped over him. Instantly Rich raised up his hips and drove over me forcing me under him and to my back. His arm was still strongly around me. It was a simple procedure for him to squeeze with his chest weight on me. The pin was secured almost instantly! My frantic attempt to undo my error barely had time to even begin.

That quick, it was over! My grade-schoolish mistake stopped the climb within site of the peak. 12 months of dreaming, training, dreaming more and working more was done. Though I worked harder, longer and smarter 4 years later in preparation for the Munich Olympics, I don't think I have ever worked with more zeal than to win that State Title. That drive had gotten me to the state finals, the doorway of a state championship, but it didn't get the final prize.

The race was over. Had I failed? Yes, I failed to reach the top and my immediate goal. But I also knew I had improved immensely over the previous 12 months. Therefore, the work was worth it even though I hurt so badly inside. My family shared similar thoughts.

Picking up my warm-up, which seemed as heavy as the heavyweight wrestlers still competing, I dragged my way to the locker room. Maybe this was a nightmare and I would wake up soon. I wanted to avoid everyone and cry alone.

The next person I saw was Phil. He came strolling down from his high bleacher seat. When I saw him my mind raced even more to the disappointment he was feeling. I waited a bit. But when he reached the floor, Phil turned away. My 24-year-old big brother was crying! After a bit, he made his way over to me. We hurt and cried together. I was assured that he still was proud of me.

The next morning our family brought Phil to the airport for his return to his base in Kentucky. Comments were made about him facing his commanding officer. As Phil climbed into the airplane and waved goodbye, I turned to John and asked what their talk was all about. He sounded surprised and said, "You don't know about how he came?" "No," I said, "What is this all about?"

John explained how Phil had come after the General of the Base had cancelled all passes for all soldiers because of a few (not Phil) who had broken some of the rules. Phil had been nervous about the MP (Military Police) coming to get him all day. He was ready to face his officer knowing there would be punishment when he returned. (For 2 weeks Phil had to report to his commanding officer to do whatever he wanted done.) Phil felt watching me in that state tournament was worth it. He is always quick to say he would not have come if security matters had been at stake.

The 12 months of intense dreaming and training, the closeness of reaching the goal, the instant end by a foolish move, Phil's and our family's intense interest in seeing me compete, all worked together to make that the most memorable and significant match of my 16 year career. So many lessons were learned and relationships confirmed. I learned:

1. The love and commitment of those near and dear to you is verified at key turning points.
2. There are no guarantees to sports victories. You cannot buy a state title.
3. Dreaming, commitment and work mature and change a person so there is benefit even if the goal is not reached.
4. Each time we stretch our God-given talent we get to a higher plane.
5. God seems to enjoy bringing good out of difficulty and disappointment.
6. The more you work and dream of something the more you will hurt if you fail, but the discipline will change and mature a person so it is worth every bit of the effort.

These lessons were going to be so helpful and needful in my next 12 years of competition, my climb to Olympic Gold, 30 years of marriage and parenting, 32 years of coaching and directing Camp of Champs and much more. Today I see so much good that has come because I strove for that State Wrestling Title even though I never earned it.

You can find other articles by Ben & John at their web site. Today Ben & his brother John 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