

**Early Failures can be Changed into Victories**  
**Or**  
**Working through Disappointments Can Lead to Success**

**By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson**

**#48**

Losing in the finals of the State Tournament my senior year was a shocker. So close to the goal of State Champion, yet so far. Compliments on 2<sup>nd</sup> place eased the pain of the reality of my elementary mistake. But the disappointment for my family left me wondering if all the work in preparation was worth it.

The goal of a football scholarship evaporated when our team lost every game, and now dreams of wrestling in college were lowered by a state loss. I figured “what College/University coach would want a 2<sup>nd</sup> place finisher?” Coach Walsh’s 20-plus letters sent to colleges and universities across America that had an Architecture degree, football and wrestling seemed like a waste at this time.

But my optimistic wrestling coach was not done. Coach Jack Walsh came with a new idea. The Olympic Trials were in a couple weeks just an hour away. Why not go and “maybe a college coach will see you?” Why not? I had never seen a freestyle match, let alone wrestled in one. The rules are different for Olympic Competition. Coach Walsh had brought us to watch the Pan American team trials for Greco Roman the previous summer. That was really different!

Despite my hesitance, my persistent coach had another avenue. A clinic to teach freestyle rules and moves would be held the week before the Regional Trials at River Falls, Wisconsin. I would have a whole week to drill and practice the new moves.

Our wrestling room, the gym stage, was now set for the spring play. A full mat would not be available. But Coach Walsh, who was also the track coach, would see that the two 4x10 foot pads from the wall under the basketball rim could be laid out on the gym floor while his pole vaulters, shot putters, and the baseball team worked around the gym. I was conspicuous but determined to give it my best effort.

My tiny 8x10 foot mat with a joint in the middle worked for drilling. Some of my partners had never wrestled. Gary, a wrestling teammate, joined me a couple times between his Dad’s need to have him helping on their family farm. Brian, our shot putter who had never wrestled, drilled some in exchange for me trying his skill. Position, timing and skill were all important. Running and lifting were done to get in shape.

I also joined John for a practice with a couple of University of Wisconsin Stout teammates one night. My young clumsiness split the heavyweight’s eye open. We visited him in the Doctor’s clinic while he got stitches.

The Regional Trials were interesting. Come to find out, my entire weight class (191#) had only high school experience. I beat them on a basic double leg takedown and crossbody-ride leg turn. The finals were against a stronger man, but he was out of shape. Conditioning paid off again.

John’s weight class had 2 seasoned freestylers. One was Jim Tanahill of Winona State. After beating John they showed us all what freestyle wrestling was all about in the most intense match I had ever seen.

John went back to college somewhat humbled, but also a bit wiser. I went back home thinking it was merely an interesting experience. But Coach Walsh went home plotting ways to raise money for a trip to the National Olympic Trials.

2 weeks later, with Dad’s car and a borrowed singlet to keep legal, we were off on the 8-hour drive to Ames, Iowa. Iowa State University and Coaches Harold Nichols and Les Anderson were hosting the event.

Arriving the afternoon before, I loosened up on the mats and checked my weight. Coach Walsh went looking for Harold Nichols and Les Anderson. Finding Les in his office, I was quickly brought to meet him and view the display of ISU All-Americans. The lion's share were wrestlers. That began to tell me the type of wrestling program this University had.

The next day my first round draw was against Russ Camalleri of California, a seasoned World Team member at age 29. With great effort I scored a couple of points as he took me down and turned me with ease. Then he finished it with a pin. I have never forgotten his encouraging comments afterwards and have thanked him repeatedly whenever we cross paths at the NCAA's.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> round draw was Chuck Jean, a freshman at Iowa State. Coach Walsh was very excited. He figured Nichols and Anderson would come to watch. This would be my chance to impress the General of the very successful ISU program. Coach told me they were very positive about Jean's credentials and potential.

Chuck and I sparred on our feet for most of the 1<sup>st</sup> period. When I thought he was distracted and not totally focused on the match I hit him with a hard double and then immediately put in the crossbody leg ride and turned him, scoring 3 points. The period ended with Chuck on his back. Oh my, was that a mistake! I woke up the bear! He proceeded to teach me what college wrestling was.

Chuck scored 9 unanswered points and I was fighting for my life. The final score was 9-3. Walking off the mat, I felt I had missed it again. My opponent is on his back one minute, and the next minute I am fighting to be competitive and stay off my back. Coach Walsh spoke briefly to the Iowa State coaches while I headed dejectedly to the lockerroom. Coach tried to be hopeful, but it was hard to imagine how I could get a scholarship with that loss.

Returning home I told my mother I would like to attend Iowa State even if they didn't offer me a scholarship. But we both questioned how I could ever pay the bills. I loved the campus. It was spring in Ames long before it was in northern Wisconsin.

Due to Coach Walsh's letters I received many positive letters and an expense paid trip to the University of Washington. But none had scholarship money available for me. I began preparing to attend a smaller NAIA school and maybe not get the architecture.

Days after the trip the phone rang at 7 a.m. as I was preparing for school. Mom called up the stairs to say it was for me. My, was I surprised! It was Coach Nichols saying he would send up scholarship papers if I would consider attending ISU and wrestling for the Cyclones. I told him I was *definitely* interested.

After much discussion with Mom, Dad, John, my Pastor, Coach and a few others, and seeking to be sensitive to direction from God's Word, I signed and returned the papers. I was on my way to a Big 8 wrestling powerhouse to wrestle and study architecture! All the hard workouts, the ups and downs, the almost State Championship and the Olympic Trials experiences had opened incredible doors.

I have always said this story has God's fingerprints on it. Despite all my mistakes and failures, God added His blessing and made something good of it. I pray my story will encourage you to seek God's blessing as you work to reach your dreams.

**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](mailto:info@campofchamps.org); Web: [www.campofchamps.org](http://www.campofchamps.org)**