

**How I learned to Ride & Pin with Legs**  
or  
**A Confrontation that Changed My Wrestling**

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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Beginning wrestlers, of any age, usually begin by trying to do too much with their arms. That was true with me. My arms got so tired they would ache with fatigue. What I needed was to learn to use the power of my legs more.

As a young high school wrestler I was introduced to various wrestling moves that use the legs. But from the beginning my thought was too often on placement of legs more than the power positions leg rides could give. Many times guillotines and banana splits had gotten me in trouble. I could hook my legs into a crossbody ride, but with the better opponents my positions were not powerful enough to use very well.

A leg-turk was also taught by Coach Walsh. While riding, we lifted our opponents near leg with right arm and reached under with our right leg and scooped up our opponent's right leg. If we arched our backs this turned our opponent's hips and put us in a solid control position.

But, I was struggling to control the cross-body leg ride, which was so much easier to initially apply than a leg-turk. When I did get the leg hooked, better opponents easily countered it and often put me on my back or at least a compromised position. Clearly I had yet to learn how to use a cross body ride with confidence.

Midway through my senior season Mike Dutilly arrived home from University of Wisconsin River Falls, where he was a member of the wrestling team. He had been a high school classmate and teammate of my older brother Tom and was now a senior in College. Though Mike was not a college starter, Coach Walsh introduced him with definite respect and made note that Mike was on Christmas break from college and wanted to train as well as help our team.

I recall Mike walking around and stopping to watch various teammates of mine and give suggestions. When he got to me I took note that he watched and looked at various angles for some time, but without comment. At a break in the action he calmly asked questions something like this:

“You are captain, are you not?”

“You are a senior, right?”

“You are still undefeated?”

“You wish to make State again and win right?”

“Your desire is to wrestle in college?”

My answer was “yes” to all these questions. Then he sternly told me that my positions and techniques were very poor, in fact, “they stink”. If I wanted to keep winning and reach my goals, major changes needed to be made. I was using a cross-body leg ride when he stepped in to watch.

Had I not respected Mike, I might have been offended and fought his critical comment. But instead I asked him to help me. Over the next 2 or 3 practices he emphasized positions of power and control. Previously I had been thinking harder work with more running and lifting would get me victorious. In those few days Mike got me to think and emphasize positions of balance, control and power.

The emphasis on leg riding became an “arched back”. I learned I could protect myself while forcing my opponent out of position. He taught me to sit up like a proud confident cowboy in the saddle instead of hanging over my opponent like a dead man on his horse.

Instead of hooking my foot through like a grapevine on my opponents leg, I started hooking just my heel on his thigh. Instead of hugging and hooking with my arms I pushed his head and shoulders away as I turned him. Instead of turning and looking at my opponent, I arched high and looked away.

In a couple of days Mike was gone and our team continued to practice. I don't recall anything immediately changing until the semifinals of State. Against a tall powerful opponent from Luxemburg who knew leg riding also, I reversed him and out did him on leg riding enough to ride, control and turn him. I recall stepping off the mat exhausted from the intense battle knowing my leg riding had won the day.

A month later Coach Walsh took me to the Regional Olympic Trials. It would be my first Freestyle match ever. Immediately I found legs very valuable in turning people. Within another month I was in Ames, Iowa for the National Olympic Trials Tournament wondering what I was doing with all these college wrestlers. I was paired with Chuck Jean who was an Iowa State freshman. He would win 2 NCAA Titles. When I had a chance I put in the cross-body ride and turned him for 3. Chuck then woke up and beat me 9-3. But 2 weeks later Coach Nichols, of Iowa State, offered me a partial scholarship telling me years later he still remembered the way I had used a leg ride to get the turn. *Aggressiveness with Position* had earned me a scholarship.

Leg riding sprinkled my wrestling from that point on. Many key turning points and periods of domination came from a strong leg position that permitted me to ride, exhaust and turn opponents.

Two years later in the finals of the Big 8 Conference, I amazed myself and others with a 6-0 victory over Geoff Baum. It included 5 minutes and 30 seconds of riding time, much of it with legs. Geoff was undefeated, rated #1 in the Nation and won the NCAA two weeks later. Though I couldn't match that performance at Nationals it was such a confidence booster, I never questioned again my ability to win a college match.

I never saw Mike Dutilly again to thank him. But a few years ago I met his son who was still in high school and I was sad to hear Mike was no longer living. When I told his son what his Dad had done for me and expressed my thanks, his son beamed with pride.

Thank God for the Mike Dutillys of the world, who will confront young men to stretch to new heights. And I thank God I can do the same for other young people today.

**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)**