

BEGINNING OR REVITALIZING A WRESTLING PROGRAM

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

#52

What does it take to begin or to rejuvenate a wrestling program? For years I have found myself answering this question for others and myself. I don't find a simple answer. Recently my son Andy and I have taken on 2 programs that need a new jump-start. Andy has taken on my former Division III NCAA college team and I am working with a high school program, which has 80 students in the 4 grades. I give ideas praying they will help others.

1) SOMEONE MUST PROVIDE ENERGY & LEADERSHIP.

In every thriving wrestling team there must be an individual who will do many extra things to recruit, promote, organize, thank and stick it out through thick and thin. Milwaukee School of Engineering Coach, Kevin Morin, recently used the word "passionate" to describe this leadership. This passion must then be passed on to others

My high school coach, Jack Walsh, was that and more during the 3 years he coached me. My college coach, Harold Nichols, was such a man at Iowa State University for over 3 decades. Bill Farrell our 1972 Olympic Freestyle Coach exhibited the same. Although I had many other very good coaches, these 3 men stand out as central energy-givers that worked through each difficulty, misunderstanding and discouragement. They were always planning and renewing their hope both in season and out and then they passed it on to others.

Occasionally I have found this pivotal person to be an administrator, parent, fan or assistant coach. When I arrived at my first year of college coaching Dr. Richard Weeks, the Dean of Students, was talking to everyone about the wrestling program. He loved wrestling and he loved our team. He kept score, ran tournaments and was invaluable to our every success. Please be reminded that anyone can add energy to a wrestling program and responsibilities can be shared, but leadership and an undying hope is needed in this game that is so similar to life.

2) CONTINUALLY EDUCATE NEW FAMILIES & WRESTLERS.

New families and new young wrestlers must regularly be shown the value and enjoyment of the sport. People are seldom automatically knowledgeable about wrestling. This may be hard to understand for those who come from a very strong program. We may not realize the misconceptions people can have of wrestling.

Many think of the phony vulgarity of pro wrestling. It took 2 years for my mother to get past that. Today some are connecting the gladiator perspective of UFC. It is not hard to imagine family members seeing their little boys being torn limb from limb. We all have watched parents cringe as a shoulder is stretched. I often tell parents that God knew what He was doing when He made our "wrestling machines." He knew we would want to twist and turn in all directions. Parents need to be reminded how masterfully made we really are.

Misunderstandings and even ridicule can be avoided when people properly learn about wrestling. Concerns like injury and blood have been professionally dealt with. Basic rules, quality mats and protective gear (kneepads, headgear) make an extremely aggressive activity a very safe, fun experience. Most people agree with that once they are educated about wrestling. So plan events that expose and educate more people to wrestling.

3) SEEK OUT AND LEARN THE BEST TECHNIQUES.

Coaches and wrestlers need to study and search for the best techniques. Years ago coaches and wrestlers often learned techniques together from a book. Today they can learn from videos, DVD's, clinics and camps. For years I have watched diligent coaches travel near and far collecting training

ideas. Bring your wrestlers to a source of knowledge or bring top coaches and competitors to your practice room.

It has been the goal of John and I to raise the level of wrestling knowledge through the practices, clinics and camps we conduct. We thoroughly enjoy being used to bring quality wrestling techniques and training skills to wrestlers, young and old. Our goal is to “teach” and to “inspire.”

4) WORK HARD TOGETHER.

Nothing joins men like hard work. Wrestlers and coaches need to roll up their sleeves and work together. A consistent time and format needs to be established for practice with little changes. In my own development this time was 1 hour and 30 minutes. If this time has structure, is well planned and stays intense it will be more productive than the 2 ½ to 3 hour practices I often hear about.

Also, I suggest doing something as a team that is bigger than wrestling. Doing clinics, practice or tournaments for younger wrestlers can really unite a team. For years we started and finished our season that way. Through the years I have heard of wrestlers doing community service, school assemblies and much more. I still recall moving our high school coach to a new house and how it united several of us. Men who work together stick together.

5) MAKE EACH WRESTLER FEEL IMPORTANT - KEEP GOOD RECORDS.

Keeping significant accurate records can be a useful tool to motivate. It shows kids they are of value and they are unique. Each one is making a record and can see his personal progress. Records help identify weaknesses and strengths. Everyone can set goals and make and see progress.

Coach Walsh was a master at keeping records. They sure inspired me. Recently I heard his successor, Joe Hegenbarth, state that Coach Walsh taught him the value of records. For 35 years at Cumberland High School, Coach Hegenbarth used his math background to identify the status of each wrestler and then urged them to improve. Study each wrestler and know their strengths and weaknesses. Get help from a statistician to record results.

It should be noted that years ago programs were started quite simply. Everyone was new at it. It was often easier to reach a level of success. But with patience and consistent work a new or lagging program can be made to catch up and surpass many others. Just be realistic, stay at it and be encouraged with each new victory. And don't be ashamed of small beginnings.

To begin or rejuvenate a wrestling program coaches, wrestlers, parents, administrators and fans need to “put on their running shoes” and not take them off. We may not always be thanked and we may even be criticized. But be assured that the lives involved in a quality diligent wrestling team will be changed for the good as the above steps are regularly worked at. They are all ways to show the wrestlers our love for them and the value of wrestling to help mature them.

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