

The Many Facets of a True Rivalry
By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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Russ Hellickson and I had all the chapters of a true wrestling rivalry. We were both farm boys learning the sport in the early days of Wisconsin wrestling. Sometimes we learned as much from hard farm chores as from wrestling techniques taught by our coaches.

Russ grew up in Stoughton, the hotbed of southern Wisconsin's developing wrestling programs. He was a State Champion. He attended the U.WI to play football but switched to wrestling after a year. Upon graduation he took the U.WI Assistant Coach position to Duane Klevin, the new Head Wrestling Coach.

I was from a smaller northern Wisconsin town called Cumberland. It would be 10 years before Cumberland would have a state champion. Cumberland was known for its wrestling strength only in the northern regions. The stronger often-larger southern schools intimidated us.

Russ and I went out of state to improve our wrestling. I attended Iowa State University where Coaches Nichols and Anderson and Dan Gable were setting national records. As an assistant coach, Russ drove to Chicago on weekends to train with the Mayor Daley Wrestling Club led by 1960 Olympic Champion Terry McCann.

The first time Russ and I crossed paths was in an early round at the Midlands Tournament my sophomore year in college. Russ was a senior. I had just made the ISU varsity and expectations were rising. Russ physically out-muscled me and won a solid victory. The next year he did it again in the finals of the Midlands. I was badgered repeatedly by Iowa State teammates as to how I could lose to a Wisconsin wrestler. "Didn't I know that Wisconsin wrestling was significantly inferior to Iowa wrestling?"

The next summer Russ and I crossed paths again, this time as young coaches at the high school state freestyle meet. I was helping my younger brother Dan. We traveled to southern Wisconsin with a few northern wrestlers. I left thinking Russ and the southern wrestlers were better at intimidating the referees and their opponents than they were at wrestling. Russ has always been very fluent and I could only view him as a rival from across the mat.

At these wrestling events I began to learn about Russ' wife Nancy. Their friendly, very conversationalist approach actually intimidated me. I tended to avoid them. Later I was to find Russ and Nancy to be some of the most gracious, generous, tireless people I have ever known.

By the time the Midlands Tournament arrived we were both ready for a full match to remember for life. I was the returning NCAA Champion. Russ was the bronze medallist from the World Championships. After three full overtime periods I was declared the winner by a stalling call. I had finally beaten Russ in folkstyle and could finish with an undefeated senior session. Russ and Nancy still remind me that he was not stalling in that match.

Well, what better way to set the stage for the Olympic trials. We both wanted badly to be in Munich in August of 1972. It was now going to be freestyle, the style Russ had been learning from McCann. Anoka, Minnesota was the setting, just a 90-minute drive from my home in northern Wisconsin. After eliminating other opponents we paired off.

As I recall, the match started as a typical period jostling for position. Various tieups and angles were tested. Still in the first period, I found myself in a left arm underhook. I might have gotten it from our feet, but more likely, after I attempted a double and Russ countered with a wizzer. After adjustments I tightened it to a lock around Russ' lower chest for a bear hug. I attempted to buckle Russ to the mat,

but being the stronger man he would not give in to such. As I recall, we went back and forth each trying to get the advantage until we both failed and fell to the mat. Some memories are lasting. I had trained myself to scramble a lot from position to position and to explode whenever needed. My mind and body responded that instant. I had fallen to my backside. I was sitting with Russ on his knees immediately to my right. There was no time to lose. This could be a disaster. Russ was also startled and out of position. Every part of me was alerted and ready to explode. I stood up turning toward Russ and drove with all the force I could. We covered a major part of the mat and landed this time with Russ on his back. The freestyle touch fall ended the match.

There would be a second match a month later. But, a knee injury in practice a few days before had made Russ a one-legged man. It was a formality and I was on the Munich Olympic Team at 198#. There was now the desire to out do Russ' bronze, but also to represent the State and Nation that we both loved.

Six months later Coach Klevin would arrange an architectural firm job for me in Madison and a daily invitation to train at the U.WI. Russ moved up to 220# and said he would stay there as long as I stayed at Wisconsin. He and I would now train together and be on 3 World Teams, 2 World Cup teams, a Pan American Team and 2 Olympic Teams.

A couple years later I returned to Iowa State to work on a Masters degree in Architecture. Russ was a man of his word. He came back down to 198# and defeated me for the World Team in 1975. He cut a lot of weight. I moved up to 220# but never got within 10# of the weight. We each finished fourth in the World Championships that fall. On the flight home our coaches talked about Russ and I switching weights. They thought we could then both win at the next years Montreal Olympics. We switched weights and both earned silver medals. After the Olympics I moved back to WI and training often at the U. WI and with Russ until we both retired after winning the 1980 Olympic Team Trials.

Today our "rivalry" includes talking about our families. We can stay at it for a good time. Jan and I consider Russ and Nancy to be our good friends and wish our paths crossed more often.

Young wrestlers, "have at it" with those you compete against. Be a gentleman and the most determined competitor you can be. Someday something bigger than wrestling - like family, your faith in God, making the same college team *or making the US Team as strong as possible*, could turn you into lasting friends.

You can find other articles by Ben at the following web sites: www.campofchamps.org & www.TheCompetitor.org
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