

The Premier Wrestling Family – The Gables

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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Wrestling families come in all sizes and flavors. After the 1972 Olympic Trials Tournament was done in late May my brother, John, and I needed continual and serious guidance through the summer before finalizing the team selection and competing in Munich. Before then we had no idea we would be cared for by the premier wrestling family of the 20th century – The Mack and Kate Gable family.

When Dan Gable, John and I won our respective weight classes, Dan went right to work. Within hours, he was working on keeping John and I with him to train until the national training camp began in mid July. Dan knew John and I could not train most effectively in Comstock, WI. Plus he needed others to train with himself. For some reason the Peterson brothers were his pick.

First, Dan brought us to a wrestling camp at Lake Okoboji in northwest Iowa. Iowa State teammates Dave Martin, Tom Peckham and Dan had organized this camp. The site was a beautiful church camp on the west side of the lake. The format was to help teach the high school wrestlers in their 2 or 3 sessions per day and then wrestle hard with each other after every session. Our only other responsibility was to get a cabin of wrestlers to bed and keep them there.

Gable was on cloud 9. We were wrestling all day! John and I were motivated by his excitement and were thankful to get 3 meals a day and a place to sleep. We have little idea if the campers left the cabins. After the pace of training all day, we slept hard every second we could, before Gable had us running and sprinting before breakfast. After 2 weeks we drove to Ohio for another camp where Dan was booked to instruct. What an ideal setup! We had hard wrestling with other top quality wrestlers, young wrestling eyes learning and motivating our own intensity (Including high school freshman Lee Kemp). Everyone was happy!!!

During these 3 weeks, the Gable family was organizing something very special. When we were done with Ohio, the plan was to live in the Gable home for a full month and train in Waterloo, Iowa. I cannot imagine anyone opening their home to anyone more than the Gables did. We were part of the family. Dan had many friends (mostly wrestlers), so we were not the first nor would we be the last. If you were Dan's friend you were treated as a family member. For a month John and I were Dan's bigger brothers but only in size. There were some interesting dynamics. John was the oldest by 3 days. It was Dan's house and he was the natural leader most of the time. I was the biggest brother, but 1½ years younger and constantly trying to keep up. John & I gladly let Dan lead.

Training started with 2 hours of lifting, running, drilling and some wrestling in late morning. Late afternoon 2 hours of hard drilling and continual wrestling in round robins was common. Where did we wrestle? We drilled on Dan's basement mat and wrestled hard mostly in a 2-car garage owned by a close family friend. The floor sloped significantly to the center drain. Evenings were Gable's imagination time. He came up with a lot of fun and unusual ways to work on cardio and strength. His favorite after a run, was taking turns doing push-ups using a deck of cards. While John and I strained with big numbers we had picked, Dan would tell us we were lucky. When he got a small number he complained. Have you ever heard of such logic?! The "Gable Man" was always anxious to work.

Kate Gable was a master cook. Meals were great!! And we ate a lot. She was in the kitchen all day. Every meal was made to prepare Olympic wrestlers. One day I mentioned that the repeated long workouts were bringing my weight significantly under the 198# class. That evening a full plate of tasty scrambled eggs and toast was waiting for me after our evening workout. From that day until the end, Kate served me 4 meals a day. When I apologized for making the comment and causing her more work, there was no discussion. The reply, "You cannot be hampered in training. And if you are working that hard, then you will daily be given the nourishment to continue it."

One evening before we took our showers, Dan told us Kate was making a special dinner. After all the work we were doing, she felt we deserved and needed an extra nice meal. She was grilling in the backyard some special cuts of meat. Mr. Gable had come home from work and Dan and his parents were by the grill talking very intently as I headed to the shower. When I was done, the talking included shouting. Dan and his Dad did not agree about something. I was uncomfortable. When John finished his shower, I asked him if he knew about the argument. "Very little," he said. After listening further I asked John if maybe we should leave. Maybe we were causing too much strain and eating too much. We knew Mr. Gable didn't like the effect of 3 showers a day by all of us and the water dripping in the basement. John said, "Just wait and see." That was good advice!

The problem? Mack didn't think we were working hard enough! When he went to work early in the morning we were sleeping. What would you think? 3 college graduates sleeping in every morning, then working out during the day (which he never saw) and then eating every edible morsel in the house. I cannot imagine the food bills Kate was bringing to him.

The solution? Dan brought the solution to us later that night. He didn't seem happy to have to tell us that his Dad didn't think we were doing all that was needed to be Olympic Champions. We would add pre breakfast runs and sprints.

I remember getting up early the next day and running one mile hard and ending at the high school track. We then ran several sprints against each other. On the way to his office Mr. Gable watched us for a few days. The morning runs continued right up to the Games. Did we lessen the other workouts? No. As the month went on, all workouts intensified and our conditioning skyrocketed. The next time Kate made a special meal there was no complaint.

Dan often trained 4 times a day in sessions of 40 minutes to 2 hours. There were days he trained for 8 hours. My body wasn't built-up to his pace, so he let me rest during some sessions. By the 4th week I only needed one session off at mid-week and then did just an afternoon run on Sunday. John kept up a bit more with Dan than I. We were young and recovered quickly, but we saw how that type of training can over-tax the body and tear it down. Days of rest were needed and John and I wanted to attend Church on Sunday. John and I would need to study balancing hard training & recovery, especially over the next 8 years of competition, since our bodies kept getting older.

There were two interruptions. Dan had made a commitment out east. He wanted out, but felt he should keep his word. The answer was to have John fly with him and continue training. It appeared I would be left behind. When news came of the death of our Mother's twin brother, the Gable's immediately offered a car and insisted I go home to be with my family. Three days later we were back refreshed and anxious to train more than ever. Several days later ABC Sports wanted to come and tape Dan training and interview for a 3 minute special to be played during their Olympic coverage. Dan complained that it was interrupting hard training. In the end I think it was helpful. It brought reality and urgency to the fact that the Olympics were close and all America would be watching.

John always talks about Gable's Saturday afternoon – "Marathon Day". When Dan first told us about it, I was horrified. "I can't run a marathon!" We ran from site to site in Waterloo, IA. The sites were just a goal. We didn't go to the mall to shop. We went to the mall because it was 2+ miles away from the previous stop and was a good place to catch our breath. John brought that theme to Camp of Champs. We created our own "Wrestling Marathon" theme. But Gable started the idea.

I can't imagine how my whole being could have been better prepared for Munich than that month at the Gables. Our bodies were totally conditioned. Our motivation had been daily reinforced by each other. Our mental toughness tested and strengthened each day. Our confidence was at it highest.

I regularly remember Kate Gable and wish I could thank her again personally for the best training table meals I ever had and could ever imagine. She was an incredibly loving wife and mother. She loved nothing more than caring for her family and we experienced her love that summer.

For years John & I have pondered the influence of the Gables on our Olympic success. We could not have done it without that month of training. We thanked Mack Gable many times. After raising our own children, what Mack did for Dan, John and me has become even more special. Years later whenever I thanked him for being hard on us, he would apologize and then say he felt we did not have a time where we just split a gut. He felt exploding in all-out sprints would be needed in Munich. My, was he right! I am so thankful he spoke his mind.

Dan Gable, thank you for choosing John and me! We're not fully sure what all you saw in these two northern Wisconsin farm kids, but we thank God continually for you! Dan was just what we needed to prepare our wrestling for Munich and later Montreal. Why Dan thought we were the right ones to train with we don't need to know, but we will continue to say thank you for the Gables making us members of the Premier Wrestling Family of the 20th century.

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