

Olympic Training Camp Memories
By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

#68

For years John and I have been asked what the Olympic Training Camp of 1972 was like. The following memories are highlights that will give a glimpse of the intensity, the struggles and the occasional glamour that comes from a group of men pouring their efforts into a common goal.

Before the weeks of intense training could begin Coach Bill Farrell from New York needed to know who his team was. Russ Hellickson, my 3-year Midlands rival easily proved he was the best in the mini tournament, but while drilling on the day between, Russ badly injured a knee. Our final team trial match left me with an empty feeling, as I outscored a one-legged competitor. Some suggested that others should be able to challenge me. Nothing ever developed. John continued to build confidence by clearly defeating a 2-year rival of mine, Oklahoma State's 2-time NCAA Champion Geoff Baum. After the match, Geoff found our Mother in the stands. With a stern face, rough voice and pointed finger he said, "Mrs. Peterson, I wish you had never had any kids!" Mom went from being startled by the pointed statement to laughing and talking a bit as Geoff broke into a big smile. It was a true compliment and we were all reminded that the stern "competitor's look" often hides the genuine person - even in the Okies!

The following weeks mesh together. Coach Farrell's two times a day 2-hour workouts took most of our attention. Coach regularly talked to us, telling us how well we would do as a team. He made us believe that we were ready. And he had us convinced that we needed to beat each of our opponents so bad that the officials could not take the matches away from us. We believed him! Gable's training added an extra element. Dan, John, I and sometimes others met to run before breakfast. We ran for several minutes, sprinted, darted between trees and ran street curbs for variety. Often after supper we met to drill, jog or lift. Our expectations were high, we were young and we had built ourselves into being conditioned for long repeated training.

To keep my weight up I stopped often for an Arby's roast beef sandwich before going to bed. Getting enough food and energy was becoming a problem. I drank water by the gallon. We were at the University of Minnesota. They are famous for their cold snowy winters, but August can be hot and very humid. Losing 10# at most afternoon workouts was common.

One afternoon our high school coach Jack Walsh stopped in to visit. It was an emotional burst to thank him for our quality start in the sport. He and our younger brother, Dan, had come together. Dan was wrestling for Northern Iowa Area Junior College in Mason City, IA. It is amazing how visits from people like that can motivate a person even a step higher. After Coach Farrell's hard 2 hours we stayed and wrestled extra. Gable always had us going "one more". That day my equilibrium was not working right the last 15 minutes. I felt like someone had pulled the plug on my fuel tank. Stepping on the scale revealed the problem. I had lost 14# and was 9# underweight. Yes, I was dehydrated! The picture Coach Walsh took of us 3 Peterson brothers shows our lean drained condition. That night I had 2 meals, gallons of water and no extra workout.

Assistant Coach Jim Peckham told us we were over training. He was right and as we got older we fought to find a better balance. But at that time, I believe we did what we had to. We would lose the technique part of the sport to older more experienced opponents and the way to get the edge was to out-condition them. We believed all those crazy hours were going to pay off and that our cause deserved it.

John and I have always complimented Coach Farrell for keeping our team together. The political and moral spectrum of the Vietnam War and the hippie movement had polarized our nation. Our team reflected this divide.

One day Rick Sanders brought a radio to play music of his choice. As we were warming up he put it very loud for all to endure. It annoyed some of us. A couple requested it to be at least turned down, but to no avail. As we jogged circles I ran by and turned it down. With a laugh Rick turned it back up on his way by. On my next round I reached to adjust it again. In my haste the radio was bumped and tipped over. Rick

accused me of breaking the radio, I think mostly in jest. But to this day, the story is told that we were opponents. That was not really true. Rick was a very likable fun intense wrestler. I was working to be the same. What I didn't like was the 60's hippie philosophy that promoted immorality and lack of responsibility. Rick was a great wrestler but the philosophy he endorsed was hurting several of our wrestlers.

A thought that did unite our team was "beat the communists". The Cold War had divided our world in two and the political nature of the war was played out in sports. We were not just preparing to beat our opponents; we were working to beat the Soviet and Communist Block system. Patriotism was evident!

Learning the down position was a challenge and an honor. Coach Farrell, Coach Peckham and Coach Bill Weick had come out of the 1950's where Freestylers stayed down for 3 minutes. All 3 of them took turns on us. They were ruthless. That was a test that I enjoyed and left with renewed respect for seasoned coaches that would do whatever needed to prepare their athletes.

In the midst of these workouts, Farrell told us to pick a partner for a full timed match. That day Gable and I had been drilling and sparring with each other in early practice, as we had done for 4 years. Slowly the thought hit me. I had never in 4 years been in a timed full match with Gable. Should I keep score? Would he be keeping score? Yes, most likely! We began, fighting for position, shooting and countering each other, a takedown each, a second for him and then a turn for me. But how would an official score it – one or two points? Did we tie or did I win by one? As the practice ended I contemplated how 4 years before he handled me with ease outscoring me by dozens every workout. He was now a much better wrestler, but I had finally caught up with him. But had I beaten him? I was not sure how an official might have called the turn – 1 or 2 points? How could I ask Dan? Gable didn't lose! I respected him too much to even ask him to acknowledge a loss or even a tie. How could I take pleasure in beating an opponent that wrestled 48½ # lighter than me? I chose to say nothing. It would be 25 years before I got the courage to ask if he remembered the match. He nodded yes. I asked if he remembered who won, he simply raised his head from the autograph he was signing for a young camper and calmly said, "you". That experience put an explanation mark on all the confidence Gable, Farrell and others were pumping into us.

A statement by John sums up what our summer of training had done to us. It came in Washington D.C. where we met all the other summer Olympic Teams to verify passports, receive uniforms, get pictures taken, do interviews and tour a bit. The afternoon we were to visit the White House and meet the President Gable had plans for us to get a workout. When the teams returned our Team Manager Russ Houk asked where we had been. John's reply, "We were getting a work out in. Do you want us to go to Munich to win medals or do you want us to be tourists?" Russ Hock later told us his thoughts, "If Gable said that, fine. But John doesn't think he can win a medal, does he?" John had never won or qualified for a high school State Tournament. He had never won a National College or Freestyle Championship. How was he going to win an Olympic medal? Russ quietly backed out of the room and kept his thoughts to himself. John's priorities were set. Not even the President could divert that focus.

Every national team and every wrestler has their own story. I have tried to tell ours in such a way as to answer many questions asked of John and me and to encourage younger athletes. We were ordinary people who had gotten a glimpse of how to train higher than we ever imagined. We had motivation way past ourselves. Our faith in God and our desire to represent Him and the USA drove us to train at levels we had never known before. You can do the same.

You can find other articles by Ben at the following web sites: www.campofchamps.org & www.TheCompetitor.org
Today Ben & his brother John run Camp of Champs. Contact them at: PO Box 222 Watertown, WI 53094; 800-505-5099 or ben@campofchamps.org