

The Night My Hero Cried

by Ben Peterson

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A common question I am asked is, "What motivated you to be so intense in your wrestling and to stay at it for 16 years?" The following story may give you some answers.

Growing up in a home with five boys and one girl, I have many fond memories of the positive influence each of my family members had on my wrestling.

As a grade school boy I was especially impressed with my oldest brother, Phil. He was my "big" brother who excelled in football, wrestling, baseball, track, and in his studies as well. I often found myself wanting to follow in his footsteps by doing well in sports and school.

However, during my elementary school years, I recall Phil appeared to be very pushy and demanding of his younger brothers.

At times, he could have been termed "big bully". No doubt we referred to him that way more than once. He demanded that we play ball with him, which was fine for a while. But the intensity and length of the practices and games went beyond what I could tolerate as a grade school boy.

It wasn't until I was in high school and Phil was away at college that I began to appreciate his example. It was great to be known as "Phil's brother." By this time he was excelling at the University of Wisconsin and continuing to do well in his studies with a dream to become a lawyer.

During the summers, Phil continued to include me in his training, yet his summers of training for Big Ten football were often too intense for me. Until he graduated, I vacillated between going hard with him and avoiding him. He graduated from college my junior year of high school.

That was the summer I will never forget, as a very unique and special relationship was built between us. Our country was in the midst of the Vietnam War, and Phil was waiting to report to the army. Instead of getting a job, he read his law books day and night. Each morning, I would knock on his door and get him out of bed. He'd then take on the role of coach, trainer and companion.

Phil was my brother, my personal friend, my hero. I learned to work under his watchful eye. We knew, since I was about to head into my senior year, if I were going to accomplish the dream of playing college football on a scholarship, I must have an outstanding season and extra training would be necessary.

Phil was the motivator and organizer of my training. I needed his challenge and encouragement as I lifted weights, ran, and hit the blocking sled.

As the summer progressed, we formulated two very specific goals. First, I would play football well enough that season to be asked to play for a college team and, second, I would become a wrestling state champion.

By late September, Phil was off to basic training, and I was in the middle of football season. But my football dreams slowly melted away, as our team failed to win even one game that year.

With the wrestling season quickly following, I earnestly began to put forth my effort to accomplish our second goal. After every match Phil would write or call to find out how I was doing. It wasn't until much later that I realized that my wrestling updates were helping him survive the intense demands and drudgery of army life. I had no idea how encouraging my victories were to him at the time.

Undefeated during the wrestling season, I went into the state qualifying tournaments with high hopes of reaching my state championship goal. The morning after I qualified for state, Phil called to confirm his plan to fly up from For Knox, KY, for the two-day tournament. I was thrilled!

Before heading to the field house on the first day of the tournament, Phil called to say all passes for off-base travel had been revoked as a result of a disciplinary problem with a few of the soldiers. I was disappointed but decided the best thing I could do was win my matches. I won the two matches that day. Saturday morning, to my surprise, there was Phil in the lobby of the hotel. He looked rough and tired from traveling half the night, but he was a great sight to me.

I won a hard-fought semifinal match that morning. Phil was pleased that I was now in the finals for Saturday evening. In the finals, I faced Rich Heinbaugh from Monroe, Wisc. The previous year he had pinned me on his way to placing second. This year I was ready for him, and it would be a different match. The first period I took him down, but out of bounds for no points. The second period, he chose top. I found myself getting away from him rather easily. It surprised me so much that I thought, "Why not get a reversal and get two points instead of one?" Using a whizzer, I decided to step over him.

Within seconds, I was on my back fighting frantically. And then the match was over. I had been pinned as a result of a grade-school mistake. I couldn't believe that I had gotten so close and then lost in such a stupid way.

I didn't want to talk to anybody. I just wanted to get out of the field house. I hoped it was a dream; that I would wake up and find that I was able to wrestle that match again. With warm-ups slung over my shoulder, I headed toward the locker room; glad to see that everyone's attention was on the heavyweight match.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Phil coming down from the bleachers. I didn't know what to say. All I could think was that I had disappointed my hero.

When Phil got to the bottom of the stairs he suddenly turned away. All the thoughts of him being the "big bully brother" flooded my mind. Then I realized he was crying. He was crying for me. He had staked his happiness on me.

The memory of that moment has returned so many times through the years. Never again did I want to see him disappointed. Win, lose or draw, I would never quit. I would do anything possible to avoid disappointing my hero again.

Many a time I have been in a tough match feeling too tired to continue, when that image of Phil crying would come to my mind. Then I'd go back to work. No matter how much I hurt, I would not quit. I never again wanted to see my hero, my coach, my friend cry because of my failure.