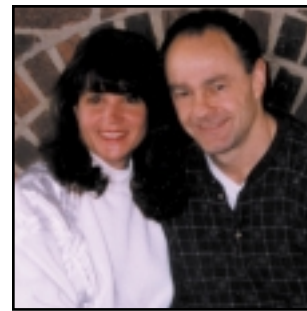


The Greatest Lesson

By Marshall Topham

By Carol and Patrick Milkovich

2x NCAA Champion and
Distinguished Member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame



Dear Wrestling Community, As we have traveled around the country presenting our L.E.A.D.E.R.S. program, we have met many truly great teachers, administrators, and wrestling coaches. Marshall Topham is definitely one of these people, and what follows is a story he told us about his greatest moment in sports. We hope you find it as inspiring as we did.

Carol and Patrick Milkovich

The Greatest Lesson

by Marshall Topham

I have been a high school wrestling coach for many years. On occasion I am asked what I consider the greatest moment in sports that I have ever witnessed from coach's perspective. This is not an easy question to answer. I have seen incredible courage displayed by a wrestler who insisted on continuing in the state tournament with one arm taped to his side after sustaining a serious shoulder separation. I watched a wrestler, who had witnessed his father drowning, make good on a promise to his dad that he would win a state championship. As a senior, he beat a previously undefeated three-time state champ in an overtime match. I have coached wrestlers who have won four state championships, wrestlers who had undefeated seasons, wrestlers who pinned every opponent, and the list goes on. While not discounting any

of those accomplishments, the greatest moment for me occurred when a boy I will call Alex taught me one of the best lessons I have ever learned.

I first became acquainted with Alex when he showed up for the first wrestling practice of the season. I was the head wrestling coach, and Alex was a shy, unassuming sophomore, blessed with only average athletic ability. But because he was willing to work hard and dedicate himself to the sport, Alex matured into a force to be reckoned with on the mat. By the time he was a senior, he was everyone's pick for the state champion at 123 pounds.

Alex was an undefeated senior with twenty-plus wins and twenty-plus pins as the team boarded a bus bound for a small town some thirty miles away to take on one of our cross county rivals in a non-conference match. On the road, as was the custom, I began to motivate the team by reading wrestling records from the "Wrestling Coaches' Association Weekly Newsletter," which had up-to-the-minute state records for both teams and individuals. They published records for every aspect of wrestling: most wins, most consecutive wins, most take-downs, most near falls, most reversals, most pins, etc.

Of prominent interest on this trip was the state record for the fastest pins, which listed the ten fastest pins ever recorded in the state. The record had been broken sev-

eral times during the current season, and each time the wrestler who had been pinned was Jim, who was the 123 pounder from the school we were wrestling that night. We all knew Jim; he was a senior who had been their team manager for the previous three years. Jim had always wanted to wrestle, but he suffered from a severely debilitating disease, and barely able to walk, he had never been able to win a spot on the team. This year, however, the school had no one at 123, so they allowed Jim to compete. It had been a long year for Jim because each time he took the mat, his opponent would pin him a little faster than his previous opponents. His name was in the record book several times for being on the losing end of the state's fastest pins. Most people would have quit, but Jim's innocence and meekness, as well as his love of the sport and his pride in being a member of the wrestling team, inspired him to continue facing opponents week after week.

As a team, we could not have been more excited about that night's match. We were confident we could set several new team and individual records that night against a much smaller school with a weaker program. Everyone was the most excited for Alex. He would not only remain undefeated, but he would also keep his record-setting pin streak alive and would undoubtedly be the first member of our team to ever make the state record book for the fastest pin. In fact, most of us were confident he could accomplish the task of pinning Jim in less than six seconds, setting a new state record.

Emotions ran high at the weigh-in. As the match began, they were at a fever pitch. We were not a popular group in this community. As the time finally arrived for the 123 bout, we were all giving "high fives" to one another and to Alex as he prepared to take the mat and etch his name into wrestling history. I am not sure what my last words to Alex were as he left the bench, but I am confident they echoed the



Michel of Marysville, 145 lb. Pilchuck fought his way out of this nearly a cradle to decision Josh Crawford, Lake Stevens, 4-3. Lake Stevens won the league championship with this 32-27 victory. Photo by Bill France.

mood of the team, something like, "Now go out there and set a new state record and make us all proud!"

As the whistle blew, the confidence on our team's faces quickly melted into bewildered expressions when Alex didn't even attempt an immediate take-down. This soon turned to shock and disbelief as we watched Jim take Alex to the mat to score the first two points. As the match continued, each of us began to realize that not only was Alex going to miss the chance for the fastest pin, but he was also going to lose the match, abruptly ending his undefeated season and his string of consecutive pins. In fact, we were witnessing one of the most convincing theatrical performances any of us had ever seen. In retrospect, I realize that we also witnessed one of the most altruistic acts it has ever been my privilege to experience.

Chaos reigned supreme as the match ended. Even before Jim's hand could be raised in victory, his teammates and fans stormed the mats. As Alex returned to the bench, Jim was riding atop the shoulders of his team to the deafening chants of the exuberant crowd. It took several minutes for order to be restored and the match to resume. I'm sure it was several days or weeks before Jim could wipe the smile from his face. From hometown humiliation to hometown hero in six minutes; his life would never be quite the same.

On the bus ride back home, I sat with Alex. Before I was even seated, he apologized for not setting a new record. Of course, I apologized to him for my narrow-minded perspective and then asked what had motivated his actions. He told me that as the announcer introduced Jim, he saw Jim's coaches and teammates, as well as many of the fans, looking embarrassed that Jim was a part of their team. "I knew right then," he said, "I had to do something, and it suddenly seemed more important that Jim win than I set a record."

Later I had a chance to visit Alex's home. It was a corrugated metal shack with a dirt floor and no electricity or running water. I understood then why Alex had never allowed me to take him all the way home after wrestling trips, always asking me to drop him off at the edge of town. I also gained an understanding of why he had such an uncommon regard for the less fortunate; it was because he was one of them. Alex truly understood the principle of gratitude. His unselfish willingness to put the needs of others ahead of his own desires made a lasting impression on many of us. Alex may have lived in

poverty in the eyes of the world, but his unselfish perspective made him one of the richest and happiest people I have ever known. There is no question that he made his teammates and his coach very proud that day.

So my greatest moment in sports has to do with losing, not winning. It has more to do with motive than with results. It is a story of an extraordinary athlete who was willing to lose in order to make a winner of a person whose needs were greater than his own. I learned a lesson about compassion and gained a new perspective on winning and losing that day, and Alex's generous

heart won my enduring respect. I was Alex's coach, but he was my teacher, and I am grateful that he provided me with my greatest lesson in sports.

(Carol and Patrick Milkovich, have developed the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. program, which is composed of a series of "Commit to Success" workshops that they can present to students in grades 6-12. If you are interested in this program, please contact them by phone (248) 375-2553, fax (248) 375-0631, or e-mail leadersprogram@comcast.net. For more information, you can also visit their website at www.leadersprogram.org.)

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