

# A Self-Made Man **or** A MAN HELPED BY MANY

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson



**S**ome people pride themselves with being a “self-made man”, or others credit them with such. Actually, there are very few, if any, such people. If the truth were to be known, most everyone who succeeds has a network of people who influence them and they make good choices. We all can gain greatly from those around us. In some of my past articles I have told of some of those who helped me. Let me tell about three more who helped me win the Olympics but even more importantly how to deal with those victories.

There were 3 men who had one thing in common. They were all pastors I knew during my 16 years of competitive wrestling. They helped put winning and losing in their rightful places. The first man was the pastor of the church in Rice Lake, WI, 21 miles from our home in Comstock. Bruce Stukka was a good-natured, positive, steady man of God who I learned from most every Sunday during my grade school and high school years. Although I don't know if he was a strong sports fan himself, I never remember him discouraging the extra intensity and time we spent training and competing. Others often gave me the impression that all that energy could be better served in church work or farm chores.

I remember Pastor Stukka visiting our home once and going down in the basement

Harold Nichols Open - Cons. Semi 149-lbs. Cyler Sanderson (ISU) dec. Larsen (UW LaCrosse), 14-5. Photo by John Johnson.

where my brothers and I were lifting weights. He saw this was no passing fancy. The perspective I have never forgotten was the way he simply urged us to “honor God and our parents in it all.” That idea has stood with my brother John and me ever since and is our regular encouragement to those we train.

Dr. Duane Brown was my pastor during the most intense years of my wrestling career. I appreciated his straightforward aggressive preaching at a time in my life when I was seeing every temptation Satan can throw at a university student. He taught me God's Word and helped me establish personal convictions of my own - of who God is, who I am and what Christ has done for me.

After just 6 months of attending his church I won the Big 8 Conference Championship for the second time. Immediately Pastor Brown asked me to tell the entire church about it and to thank God. I did. Two weeks later I won the coveted 190# NCAA National Championship. He had me do the same again. After winning both tournaments again my senior year, I again was asked to give a public testimony. Then he sent me out to other churches nearby to do the same for their youth groups. When I returned with the Munich Olympic Gold he asked me to thank God publicly again.

I don't know how much of a premeditated plan Pastor Brown had, but in the end he led me to thank God directly in a public way each time I won. That became so important because after the Olympic victory I was traveling more than once a month to do wrestling

clinics and speak to schools, businesses and church groups. It was now much easier to thank God in these public settings. Thank you, Pastor Brown, for leading me to do something I am still doing and enjoying today.

The third man was not my pastor. I only remember hearing him speak a couple times. But through a mutual friend, Rich Bencek who had just won the 177# NCAA Championship for Iowa State University, I ended up living in the home of Pastor John Hamilton and his wife Virjama. I lived in their home for about 8 months while preparing for the 1976 Montreal Olympics. It didn't matter that I did not attend his church. “Brother John”, as everyone affectionately called him, had a ton of energy. Although he had various bouts with cancer he enjoyed life and helped others around him to do the same. Life was most always more than a “half-full cup” to him. His wit brought many to laughter and his caring brought many to his door. I still remember the special dinners done for guests. I often helped prepare it by the end of my time there. He had a deep faith in God yet his honest struggles with the uncertainties of life showed me how real of a man he really was.

Pastor John didn't have a large church. That was not his goal. He ran Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) on the Iowa State University Campus for many years and played the piano for several area musicals. I think he knew and “pastured” people from every church in town and many that didn't attend a church. His goal was to help people and point them to Christ.

Pastor John, thank you for your positive view on life, your honesty regarding weaknesses and temptations and your unselfish labor to help all those you could - not just those who might help you.

You may think it strange to read about pastors in a wrestling magazine. But the point I hope you see is that key individuals influence not only athletes to win, but also how they deal with those victories.

I encourage parents and coaches to build a network of quality people around their youth. And I encourage you athletes to draw perspectives from the key individuals around you. These people won't be perfect, but if they point you to the truth it will be valuable to you the rest of your life.

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