Naïve Freshman

Today it is hard for me to imagine how anyone could be more naïve than I was coming out of the small town school of Cumberland in northwest Wisconsin. In those days living there it was easy to imagine you were way on the edge of many things and a long ways from the mainstream of U.S. life.

As I arrived at Iowa State University it soon seemed like I was on the fringe of the team. Almost everyone was a state champion and over half more than once. What was I doing there as a state runner-up? The upper classmen had this unsettled discontented attitude. Although they had finished 2nd the year before with three champions, Dale Bahr, Reggie Wicks and Dan Gable, they talked like they were miles from the top but they wanted it badly. I did not arrive fully understanding the significance of my team's past success. I did not understand the gauge or the standard the NCAA's set. And it never dawned on me that I was part of a measuring stick many were looking at.

Months of Work

The stage for the end of the season tournament title is set by the weeks and months of hard training throughout the season. When Coach Harold Nichols was asked that fall about the prospects of his team, the man of few words summed up his thoughts and hopes by simply saying, "They have great work habits, they work very well together."

At that point I was working to establish myself as a student more than as a wrestler. The only way I could conceive of being part of the team was when they all graduated! I was not close to beating any varsity wrestler and only got to wrestle in one freshman dual and two or three open tournaments.

The ups and downs of that season did not give this young freshman the indication his team could unseat the perennial success of Oklahoma teams. Placing 2nd to Michigan State at the Midlands without the Oklahoma teams showed me that my team was near the top of university teams, but certainly not on top of the heap. I was introduced to the Oklahoma rivalry and watched us split duals with them. I was told this happened occasionally, but more often we lost to both. ISU hosted the Big 8 Conference Tournament, so I watched it completely, trying to soak up all I could. We finished third! Iowa State was near the top of the heap, but again under the two Oklahoma schools.

The Nationals Begin!

Finally the season of practicing was over and the team departed for Nationals in Provo, Utah. I only recall them quietly packing the night before and heading off to the Des Moines airport while the rest of the world around them went off to class. As I think back it was like a husband and father saying goodbye to his family and going off to work for the day while his kids go off to school. Nothing unusual. No great fanfare. Dad is just doing his thing while they do theirs.

News began to trickle back that several members of the 11-man Iowa State team were doing well and that Gable was pinning everyone. It was almost an interruption to hear at first. Schoolwork needed to be done. And then it was over and Iowa State had won! And not just won, but scored more points than had ever been scored in the history of the tournament. There were eight All-Americans and three Champions (Dan Gable, Jason Smith and Chuck Jean.) To top it all off, Gable was the Outstanding Wrestler and also won the most pins trophy.

The point that affected me the most was the welcome home. Sunday afternoon the team flew back arriving on campus well after dark. News spread through the dorms that there would be a pep rally in the old State Gym. I arrived early with another freshman teammate and got a seat while they were still setting up chairs. Quickly the chairs were filled and students were standing wherever they could in the back, on the sides and on the overhanging running track. The cheerleaders came in first and led the mob in a couple cheers. There was a lot of excitement. Then the team, coaches and manager walked through the door one by one. To this day I recall my thoughts– "I know these guys! That's my team!! These are ordinary men facing the problems of the late 1960s just like everyone else. They are tempted like everyone else and fall into dangerous habits like others."

Then I thought, "These are normal people who have taken their God-given abilities and faithfully worked hard for a long time and they outdid everyone else at it. If they can do it, then it is possible for me to do the same." That night my hope and my confidence rose 200%. Being a top wrestler in the nation was possible. Now it was even likely for me to dream of and work for it. I should work to make the team and help it win Nationals again.

This experience reminds me of Proverbs 25:25 which says:

> *"As cold water to a weary soul,*
> *So is good news from a far country."*

I was refreshed and encouraged by the news I heard. When I heard of my team's success and then saw them standing there with big sheepish grins, I knew all their work did pay off. They had upset the perennial winners. I knew it would be worth it for me to work as hard as I could to do the same.

That was the Nationals I never saw. I only received news of it from afar. But the work and success of my team and the reaction of others changed my whole perspective and set a course for my next three years.

My next article will deal with my 2nd National Tournament, which I'll call: "The Inconsistency of a Young Competitor."

**Ben & his brother John run Camp of Champs Wrestling Camps. Contact them at: Camp of Champs, PO Box 222, Watertown, WI 53094; Phone: 800-505-5099; E-mail: ben@campofchamps.org; Web: www.campofchamps.org.*