2008 Harold Nichols Cyclone Open - 125 lbs. Tyler Graff (Wisconsin) grabbing the head of Nick Fanthorpe (Iowa State) in their championship finals match. Fanthorpe decisioned Graff 4-2. Photo by Johnnie Johnson.

My recent articles have expressed some of the early events that were definite factors in preparing John and me for the rigors of Olympic training, wrestling and competition. In life it is often the waiting and the delays that become key factors in major successes years later. I believe that was the case with us. We learned how to rehabilitate and wait, yet mature and advance.

After breaking my leg in 7th grade there was a long period of recovery. Five weeks in traction and then 6 more weeks in a full cast trapped me in bed for a full 11 weeks. The right leg was a pitiful sight when the doctor first cut the cast off. You have never seen a weaker looking spindly leg. But it was a great sight to me. I was now free to stand and walk on crutches!

Rehabilitation meant working with two beanbags made by my mother, one light one to start with and a heavier one when the leg got stronger. At age 12, it was my first "leg extension machine." It was simple and worked in our kitchen. Sitting on the kitchen counter with the beans hanging over my ankle, I extended the leg until it was thoroughly exhausted. Before long, the bags were strengthening the other leg also.

It was almost a year before that leg was ready to run and play. So, as an 8th grader basketball was given a try. Although I had plenty of height for my age, coordination was not back yet. Practicing all year and getting to play only two minutes of the final quarter of the last game of the season confirmed that no coach would be recruiting me for basketball.

That same year I was able to dabble with wrestling a bit just as John had the year before. Joe Hegenbarth was the junior high math teacher and the first wrestling coach at Cumberland High School. He had recruited and been the first coach for our older brothers Phil and Tom. Coach Hegenbarth was not coaching in the high school any more. (He would return as the head coach for Cumberland High School years later and eventually be inducted into Wisconsin's George Martin Hall of Fame for Wrestling.) For two weeks the wrestling mats were put on the stage of the old junior high gym. Coach taught wrestling moves in P.E. classes and after school practices with an intramural tournament to end the two weeks. I wrestled one match and won.