In recent writings my brother John and I have been explaining various things that affected our early years of development and eventually our years on US National Wrestling Teams. From these events you will see that our grade school wrestling experiences were very limited and at best introductory.

With our mother guarding us from our older brother's wrestling, no grade school or club programs available and John's freshmen knee injury problem, we each brought to our high school start a total of one official intramural match in 8th grade P.E. class.

By the time John started his sophomore year, and I my freshman year, our mother was knowledgeable and excited about having us wrestle. Together we all shared anticipation for the wrestling season. Each weighing just over 127#, we practiced together a lot and hoped to get matches at that weight. Neither of us was ready for varsity level, so John got the junior varsity spot at that weight with me hoping he would make varsity soon.

John started out strong winning 3 JV matches by pins against Turtle Lake, Unity and Clear Lake. Experiencing a growth spurt, I started looking to wrestle JV at 133# but couldn't beat Lee McClaine. When John got a chance to wrestle varsity at 133# (the varsity man had been pinned every time and didn't seem to want to make weight to be pinned again) Lee McClaine went down to 127# leaving 133# JV open. I got my first JV match and won 3-1 while John got the first takedown before experiencing a barrage of points and then getting pinned at the varsity level.

Christmas break gave us time to get more hungry and anxious for the heart of the season. I was able to secure the 133# JV position and got a forfeit and then a 0-4 loss. John, still wrestling 127# on JV, lost to Ladysmith 0-5. As we recall, weight became an issue for both of us. With continued growth spurts we were straining to make our weights. Missing meals and having no energy at practice and meets didn't make sense. John moved up to 133# and I to 138# for the Chetek match. We both suffered first period pins. I can only imagine we must have thought we were totally outclassed by the Chetek Bulldogs. They defeated our Cumberland Beavers 40-8. At the time we did not know John wrestled Harry Rhodes, the future 4-time state qualifier and state champion. I would get a full taste of Harry's wrestling the following year. The next week was better; we each pinned our Barron Bears opponents.

A week later John pinned his Spooner JV opponent, but I am nowhere to be found in the scorebooks. About this time I had a "big tryout" match with our varsity 138 pounder. He was a senior but tired of losing and too often by pin. I don't think he was real motivated that night. At the end I was ahead by 1 point and became Coach John Rutter's 2nd freshman to make his struggling varsity team.

The night of the tryout victory another clumsy freshman rolled over my left hand and dislocated my ring finger. The dislocation exposed the fingernail causing infection to develop. The new varsity position had a new wrinkle.

With infection in my finger increasing daily my mother sent me to a doctor. His orders were simple – soak the finger in hot water several times a day and no wrestling for two weeks. It didn't take a genius to figure out my season was over. Only the state tournament was past that date. I had already missed practice to visit the doctor so I was quite sheepish about walking back to the high school to tell Coach and then join John for our ride home.

Coach Rutter surprised me. He obviously wanted me to wrestle more. His response, "A little infection in a finger should not stop a man from working. I'll get a metal protector for it and you get permission from your parents." Dad and Mom were favorable. Coach thought it best to sit out the next match with Spooner before I began my high school varsity career. Coaches and teammates worked to get me ready. Starting in referee's position holding my opponent's elbow with the swollen taped up left hand didn't work, so they taught me to start on the other side. The rest of my career either side was comfortable to start on, something most wrestlers don't develop.

We all knew John was the better wrestler between the two of us. John asked for a tryout. Coach said he would have to go up the ladder. John must defeat the former 138# varsity man first. I think just to save face, the senior said, "No way am I going to let 2 first year brothers both beat me in one week." He went after John and beat him.

A week later we faced Grantsburg in a dual. At varsity 138# I was pinned in 2:20. Two days later for the season's last dual both John and I were in the varsity lineup. John won 2-0; I was pinned in 3:37. Coach had not found a winning 138 pounder but he insisted I had the spot.

The next week was an invitational. I was pinned twice and out. The conference tournament brought the same and the regional tournament for state qualification brought another loss by fall and the end of my rookie season.

My record was 4-1 on JV. I was 0-7 on varsity, losing all by falls. Often I tell people I lost 14 times – I not only couldn't win, I couldn't stay off my back. I started each varsity match working for a win. Before long I was fighting not to have this long gangly body pinned to the mat. I failed every time. Not a very glamorous way for an Olympic Champion to begin a career in wrestling.

John had gone 6-2 on JV with all 6 wins by falls. On varsity he was 1-1. John was already a sophomore. His start showed promise but not likely that he was getting ready for a run away victory at the Olympics. But there was a lot of time to train. He had 11 more years to prepare for that day.

The key thing I remember from that season was the positive perspective people gave us. Even though I had lost every varsity match by fall, people were hopeful about my future. Various ones saw potential and gave me confidence for the next season. John and I were hooked. With our parent's giving a positive God honoring perspective at home, our church giving us promises from God's Word, and our teammates, coaches and friends encouraging us, we couldn't wait for the next season.

It is so important to give young wrestlers hope. It will keep them going while they dream, work to gain experience and it will also stay with them after they start winning. Family, friends, coaches, teammates, teachers and fans who see a glimpse of potential in our youth can be so helpful when they communicate a hopeful perspective to them. This kind of encouragement sparked a fire that would burn in John and me all the way to the Olympics. In reality many would help to keep that hope burning for the next 15 years. We were talking of a better next season as soon as our rookie year was over. We had just begun! And we were anxious for much more to come.

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