

A REVIEW BY JOHN G. PANAGIOTOU

OF DR. BILL WELKER'S THE SPARROW'S SPIRIT: A CHAMPION WRESTLER'S LIFETIME REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER AND PERSEVERANCE

John G. Panagiotou

It is amazing to see how the passage of time tends to make one appreciate in a different light the people that God puts in our paths during the course of our lives through His Divine Providence. One of those such people for me over thirty-eight years ago was Warwood Junior High School's Dr. Bill Welker. During those three formative years at the school, I came to know Coach Welker very well as teacher, coach, and mentor in the classroom, on the football field, and on the wrestling mat.

Though I excelled in the academics of the classroom far above my level of excelling on the athletic field or mat, it made no matter to Coach Welker in his expectations of me as a student, as an athlete, and most importantly as a person. A true wrestling Hall of Famer, Welker believed that it was still a matter of importance that I learn the sweet science of technical wrestling as a discipline and to be the best competitor that I could be regardless of championship potential or not. He would often remind us in reading and language arts courses which he taught that no matter what life circumstance that we find ourselves in that it was up to us to make the necessary changes in ourselves to persevere to be the best people that we could possibly be.

Coach Welker, though not a physically tall man in stature, commanded a respect by us students by his mere presence. I think that in him, I came the closest to knowing what a nineteenth-century Prussian army officer must have been like. Though I did not want to incur his wrath, I sought his advice and approval. I believe that it is this type of inspired "old school" culture and respect for authority that is woefully missing in this present generation in the schools in particular and in society in general. The thing that rings clear is that Coach Welker really cared about us kids and he expressed it in his own strict way. Through the lens of time and maturity through life experience, I have come to really appreciate and value him ever more as a teacher, coach, and friend.

In Welker's latest contribution to the literary world, *The Sparrow's Spirit: A Champion Wrestler's Lifetime Reflections on Prayer and Perseverance*, the reader is given a very personal look inside the heart, mind, and soul of Bill Welker. As one of the foremost experts on the sport of wrestling in America, Welker offers us a very different work in *The Sparrow's Spirit* in contrast to his classic work which appeared in two editions, *The Wrestling Drill Book*. I think it would be a fair distinction to make in calling *The Wrestling Drill Book* a work about "the art of wrestling" and *The Sparrow's Spirit* a book about "the art of living one's life."

In *The Sparrow's Spirit*, Welker begins his memoir by introducing the reader to his humble Protestant beginnings as a precocious youth who was born into a storied wrestling family in Shamokin, Pennsylvania. He then traces his steps onto college upon his receiving a wrestling scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh where he had the opportunity to come under the tutelage of the legendary coach Rex Perry. Throughout the book's early chapters through the auspices of anecdotes the reader finds that from very early on, Welker perceived challenges as opportunities and sought to capitalize on them. Whether, in the

classroom, on the mat, socially, and/or romantically (that was until he found Peggy the love of his life), he faced difficulty and triumphed over obstacles.

Welker continues telling us of his life's journey and how his storied teaching and coaching career would skyrocket by making the decisive move to leave Pittsburgh and move to Wheeling, West Virginia where he would go on to teach and coach at Wheeling High, Wheeling Central Catholic, Wheeling Park, and Warwood. There he would hone his skills as an educator and coach while expanding his tentacles to the areas of wrestling official and wrestling columnist.

In reality, *The Sparrow's Spirit* transcends Coach Welker's beloved wrestling and classroom if that is even a possibility. It is really about his love of his family, friends, and God. He writes with the voice of bare honesty and vulnerability. On the matter of God, he speaks of his gradual realization of the hand of God throughout his life, particularly in relation to the prayers of his late mother for his brother Floyd and him. In fact, one of the book's most poignant, defining, and culminating moments comes when Welker writes, "After Mom's funeral, I began to feel guilty for not always being the best of sons...After disposing of some old clothing in the trash can, I happened to see a glint on the sidewalk from the street light. When I picked it up, I was amazed to see it was a lapel pin in the shape of a heart with a dove connected. Even after her departure, Mother sent her unconditional love filled with forgiveness."

Even if you don't know a thing about wrestling, I highly recommend *The Sparrow's Spirit: A Champion Wrestler's Lifetime Reflections on Prayer and Perseverance*. It is the personal account about one man's wrestling with himself in the arena of self-understanding of who he is in God's world. Each of us eventually has to step onto that life mat and wrestle that match for himself or herself. Welker gives us a snapshot of how he won that match in his life through the help and prayers of others. The book can be purchased on Amazon.com or by contacting Bill Welker at mattalkwv@hotmail.com

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