

Pass It On®... Believe in others.

Wrestling is the ultimate sport: One-on-one, you win or lose; it's up to you. Which sounds a bit harsh to gangly high school boys trying to fit in socially as well as win a little respect on the mat. They look more like flying monkeys than athletes, and only a few have grown into their singlets. Michael stands in a circle with the other boys. At the center of it all is Coach Dave, a former college wrestler, now history teacher, who doesn't miss a moment to inspire this gawky clan with tales of Spartan warfare. Sometimes he talks about his heritage: the strength of his Hispanic mother and the determination of his Dutch father. It all melds into a philosophy of believing in yourself.

"I honestly believe each kid can win every match," Coach Dave says. "And I tell them that."

The mental strength gained from a coach is as important as physical strength. And Michael soaked it up, the same way blood was sopped up in old socks pinched on bloody noses. As a freshman, Michael lost half his matches, but the next year the practice began to pay off.

"It finally just clicks," Michael says. "You walk onto the mat, and you know you're going to win. All the hours practicing and visualizing suddenly align, and when Coach Dave tells you how you are going to beat an opponent, you just go out and do it."

At a tournament in Reno, Michael was ranked nationally and faced a wrestler from the Midwest ranked a few spots above him. In the final seconds of the match, ahead by one point, Michael clung to the lead while his opponent clung to his ankle, trying to get a takedown. Michael was hopping his way out of the circle to gain a restart. It's the easy way out, like a boxer ducking out of the ring to get a breather and preserve a lead. With his back to his opponent, he took one more step. The opponent grabbed the other ankle, and Michael went down. Two points. Match over.

It's hard to know who was more disappointed, Michael or Coach Dave. They sat in a corner, and Dave asked one question: "Are you going to run away from challenges in life or turn and face them?" Michael knew exactly what he'd done

wrong---and that it could become a lifelong flaw if he didn't correct it. All he had to do was turn into his opponent and counterattack. "You'll beat him next time," Coach Dave said.

That tournament was a double-elimination tournament, and Michael would go through the losers bracket all the way to the finals and win the tournament. That's the comeback part, but not the most important part of the story. He would win a lot of matches that year. But the encouragement from that folding chair sanctuary is where he learned the most.

"When someone believes in you like that, you know you can do it," Michael says. "I often hear Coach Dave when I'm in tough situations. 'No excuses, just do it.' That encouragement has been my guide."

This is not the story of an extraordinary young man making his way to the Olympics or the top echelons of NASA. It is the story of a young man who worked his way through law school---twelve-hour days and a shift each night as a cook at a BBQ joint. "I changed my habits because of his belief in me," recalls Michael, now a volunteer coach at the high school. "I try and be that person to these young men. You need people in your life who believe in you. They become part of who you are."

When someone believes in us, we gain the strength to do the work we have to do.

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