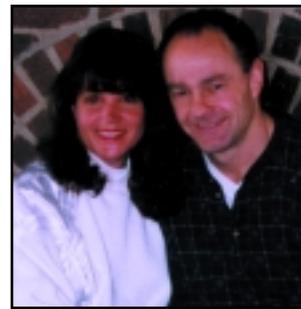


The Courage of Integrity

By Carol and Patrick Milkovich

2x NCAA Champion and
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Recently, we conducted a faculty/staff in-service for an alternative education high school in Utah, and the principal had selected for the year's theme, "The Courage of Integrity." She firmly believes that her high school is not the students' "last chance" for success; it is their "best chance," and her teachers are committed to instilling strength of character into each student who attends that school. This theme reminded us of a true story that showed the courage of integrity in both a coach and a wrestler.

It was 1956, and a young man who wanted to be a part of a championship wrestling program asked the coach if he could be the manager of the team. He had been afflicted with polio, and one of his legs was paralyzed, but his cousin was a wrestler and he loved the sport. Even though he wasn't competing during that season, he learned everything he could about the sport and did his best to work out with the team by doing the after-prac-

tice calisthenics despite the heavy brace on his leg and by climbing ropes, using only his arms. In fact, none of the wrestlers could beat his rope-climbing time.

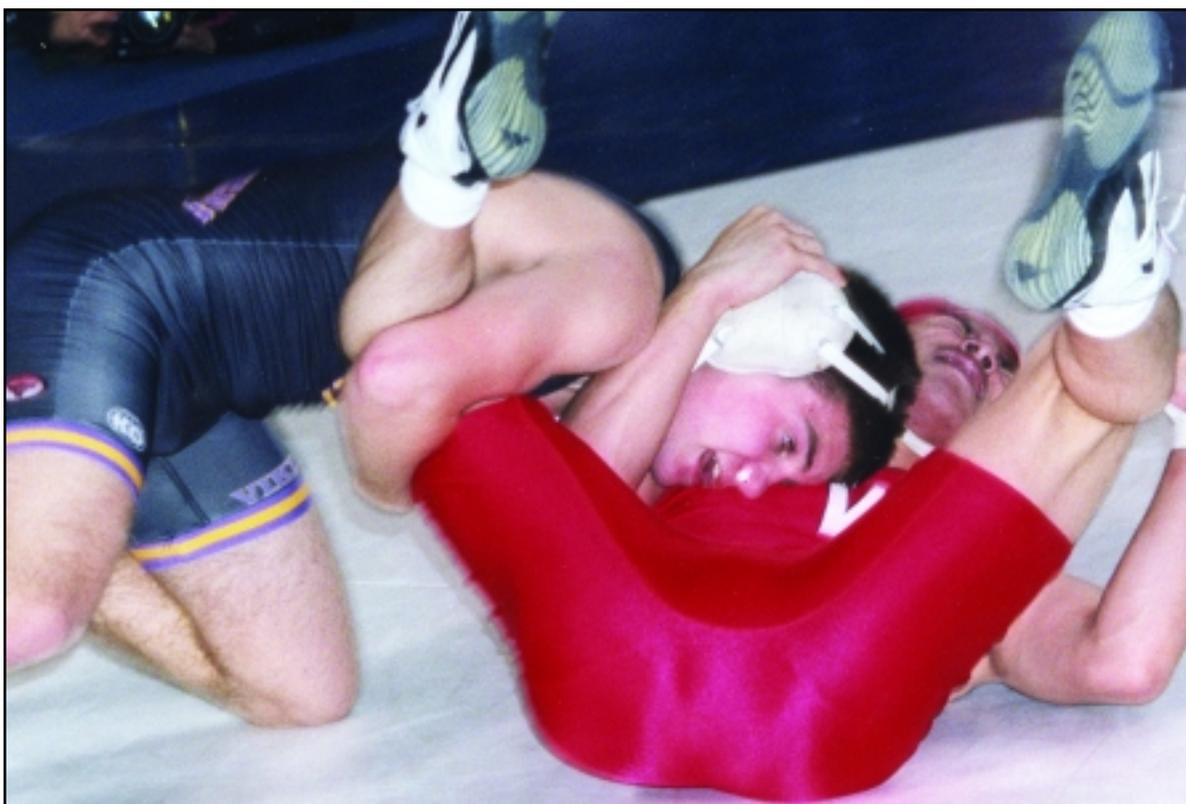
The following season, as a sophomore, he was determined to try out for the team. He knew it would be an uphill battle because of his handicap. He ignored the people who discouraged him from participating in a sport that was difficult and physically grueling. The coach didn't discourage him; he told him that he could try out if he had permission from his parents and clearance from his physician. He took that as a vote of confidence to pursue the opportunity he dreamed of.

The team rule was that when each weight class wrestled off to the top two, one of them had to win two out of three challenge matches to be the starter. The wrestling mats were laid out in the cafeteria of the school, which had thick pillars spaced around the large room. As the coach came in a half hour early to set up for the final wrestle-offs that day, he heard a

voice from behind one of the pillars. As he moved closer, he heard this young man praying for God to let him win this wrestle-off and earn a place on the wrestling team.

This wasn't the first prayer that the coach had ever heard, but it was one of the sincerest and the most moving. To wrestle, his young man would have to remove his leg brace, be carried onto and off the mat by his teammates, and take his starting stance bracing himself on the knee of his paralyzed leg. So this was not the ordinary prayer of an athlete just hoping to be victorious. This was the prayer of an extraordinary athlete hoping to be allowed to be a part of the team he respected and loved.

The young man won his wrestle-off that day, but a problem soon arose. When the principal found out that this boy was on the team, he called the coach into his office and informed him that the boy would have to be cut. The coach was told that having this young man on the team could potentially cause him severe physical harm. Of course, that was a possibility.



130 lb. Tony Kubic, Lake Stevens, putting Vinh Huynh, Wilson High School, on his back in the quarterfinals at the Mat Classic XV, the 50th anniversary Washington State High Championships. Kubic's victory put him in the semifinals. Photo by Bill France.

Even the healthiest of athletes runs that risk.

The coach did his best to plead the boy's case. He explained about the prayer he had overheard, about the hours the boy had spent, first as manager, then as athlete, trying to earn a spot on the team. Competing was the boy's dream, but the principal maintained his position. So the coach was faced with a choice. He could do as the principal requested and break that boy's heart or he could do what his heart told him was the right thing to do.

The kid had worked hard, he had made the team, and he should be allowed to compete. He decided to deliver his own ultimatum. He told the principal, "You can fire me but I cannot and will not cut him from my team."

He left the principal's office to go back to practice not knowing if he even had a job, but knowing that if he did still have the job, that young man was going to have his opportunity to wrestle. He was willing to risk his own career to do what he thought was right, and in this case, it worked out. When he went before the school board and presented his case, he wasn't fired, and the boy was allowed to compete.

By his senior year, this young man amassed an impressive 14-1 dual meet record, losing his only match to the defending state champ at 103 pounds. On occasion, the coach would even bump him up to wrestle 112 against a tough opponent because he wouldn't get pinned. He placed fourth in sectionals, but lost in the districts and didn't qualify for the state tournament. Still, his accomplishments as a part of the wrestling team are impressive and they served as an inspiration for everyone. Maybe Someone had answered his prayers, but not without a lot of courage, effort, dedication, and hard work on his part, and not without the support of a coach who never gave up on a dream.

Many years later, at the coach's retirement party, that wrestler with the paralyzed leg, who was now a very successful businessman and educator, sat in the front row. The coach thanked everyone who attended, told stories about many of the great athletes he had known, and finally pointed to this man as the one who had the biggest muscle of all, his heart. Amid thunderous applause, the man came up to the podium to embrace his coach, and through tears, he thanked his coach for giving him

the chance to compete.

The man is Dale Saraniti and the coach is my dad, Mike Milkovich. Looking back on their relationship, this quote seems so appropriate for both athlete and coach:

"The highest courage is to dare to be yourself in the face of adversity. Choosing right over wrong, ethics over convenience, and truth over popularity...these are the choices that measure your life. Travel the path of integrity without looking back, for there is never a wrong time to do the right thing."

(The authors, Carol and Patrick Milkovich, have developed the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. program, which is composed of a series of "Commit to Success" workshops that they can present to general education students in grades 6-12. They also offer half-day or full day Leadership in-services for faculty and staff, athletic departments, and athletes. If you are interested in any of these seminars, please contact them by phone (248) 375-2553, fax (248) 375-0631, or e-mail leadersprogram@comcast.net. For more information, you can also visit their website at www.leadersprogram.org.)



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