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Missouri's Matt Pell: The Quest Continues

by Les Honig

Sometimes greatness on the mat is measured by national victories; trophies won; records broken. Other times, in the rarest of cases, success is determined by a whole different measuring scale: persevering in the face of adversity; forever striving towards that yet unattained goal; all while radiating a love for the entire quest whose glow none can extinguish.

Such is the case for Missouri's over-achieving Matt Pell, who recently gained unexpected honors as a 184 pound All American finishing in 7th place at the NCAA's; unexpected to all but himself as he was actually hoping for the ultimate prize; the national winner's trophy.

Still, in typical Pell fashion, he looks at his ascension into the top 10 as merely "another rung up the ladder and a great learning experience."

The story of this unusual, but in a way typical, diehard wrestling devotee, began at the tender age of seven when back in hometown Benton City, Wash., he discovered a flier advertising a three-week-long small kids' wrestling workshop being held in his elementary school. As Matt remembers, "I was a kid who was bouncing off the walls usually so this was a natural way to channel my energies. I loved it from the first moment I started practicing."

Within a short time, however, both he and one year older sibling, Nick, began to excel, and their dad investigated and discovered a larger, continuing youth program around 45 minutes away, called the Tri Cities Wrestling Club. In what were the earliest stages of a total family commitment to the kids' future successes, they enrolled the boys there and as Mike Pell now explains, "even though it was not always convenient, we rarely missed practices because the boys really wanted to be there."

The senior Pell, who admits wrestling in an informal Chicago south-side park clubhouse as a kid himself for a brief period, continued and increased his support of the kids, traveling to weekend tournaments in Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

"We had this camper and the boys would sleep in the back and we'd sometimes drive all night," Mike recalls, "but it was a fantastic experience for both of them. If we had a choice to drive down the road to go to a tournament where they'd meet easy opposition or travel to another state where they could really be challenged by top guys they might meet in future events, we'd always choose the more difficult path." The Pell dad had a deal with the kids. As long as their dedication and



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effort never faltered, they would continue to go to the best tournaments, no matter how far. The tournaments continued.

As luck would have it, a convergence of two amazing talents was to begin influencing the boys' lives early on. At the Tri-Cities Wrestling Club, Dave Bennett, who was later to move on as a national developmental coach at the Olympic Training Center, had begun his own in-house freestyle program for outstanding middle and high school boys; using a portion of the facilities to work exclusively with them. Before long, Dave noticed the determination and work ethic of the two young wrestlers. He began to let them practice with his own group of older teens and the abilities of the two young wrestlers blossomed. As Matt remembers, "One of Dave's great assets is his knowledge of the technical side of wrestling. He was always working on the fine tuning; little things other people often miss; like positioning of your feet; getting wrist control and all that has made an enormous difference in my later matches." And Dave remembers a kid who "took instructions happily without question, always had a smile on his face and was totally eager for every new wrestling experience he could find."

On one such trip to a weekend tourney in Yakima, Wash, the 8-year old Matt was to meet the other driving force in his childhood grappling education: Scott Revis. With a tireless energy to compete, Matt would move up a weight or age class in order to wrestle not only one bracket, but two and sometimes as many as four in a single tournament (when both Freestyle and Greco were offered). In doing so this day at Yakima, he encountered one of Revis's top kids and won the match by technical fall.

The coach and Camp Director of one of the nation's most successful youth wrestling training facilities, Portland's Cobra Club, Revis was immediately struck by the young Pell's abilities and sought out his father to invite Matt to train at his own summer camp, a by-invitation-only session which would prepare the attendees for the AAU Grand National Wrestling Championships, to be held in Amarillo, Texas that year (1992).

"When I first saw Matt, he was like a scarecrow with a motor that just wouldn't quit," remembers Revis. "Long arms, long legs and tougher than hell." Yet, his dad was skeptical at first. Wondering why his tiny (60 pound) son would be invited to a far-away camp and trained for a national tournament, he resisted, that is, until his friends at the club told him of Revis' outstanding reputation.

"Even so, they put in 11-hour days of intense training," Mike says, "and at first I thought that would be awfully grueling for a kid." As it turned out, Matt loved every minute of it and off he

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went to Amarillo as one of 57 Cobra Kids that made the trip to Texas that year (35 ended up in the medal rounds).

Coming in first in Greco-Roman and third in Freestyle in his first national competition, Matt (as well as brother Nick) went on to accumulate numerous accolades. Often, the entire family would go from tournament to tournament; with his younger sister helping out at the tables, his dad becoming his matside coach and his mom assuming duties as a licensed pairing official.

The bond between the two brothers grew even deeper, as Matt explains, “We became not just brothers, but best friends too. There was competitiveness but that was in a positive way. We just wanted to push ourselves harder and harder and we always were encouraging the other to succeed. When I’d lose a match it was bad; but when I’d see Nick lose one, it hurt even more.” And the competitiveness manifested itself with insane workout regimens for both youngsters. As Matt writes in an article that appeared several years ago in “Wisconsin Weekly” intended to inspire other kids, he described his typical day while in middle school.

He’d “wake up for a four mile run, (do) 50 pushups and 50 situps before school. Then I would ride my bike five miles to school and five miles back. After school I would go to practice at Tri-Cities for two hours. Then from 7-8:30pm, I would go to practice in Prosser, Washington. When I got home I would do 30 pull-ups on a pull-up bar that my dad had built in to our stairwell, do 50 more pushups and sit-ups and then go to bed.”

With a job-related move to Wisconsin at hand, the family picked up stakes and headed back East, leaving behind all the contacts that had been made. Yet, the elder Pell made his own pre-move scouting trip to locate an ideal high school with an outstanding wrestling program, Luxembourg-Casco High, where Matt went on to win three state championships. (His only disappointment came in his sophomore year when he broke his collarbone in an early match and was sidelined for the entire season. “All I remember asking the doctors when I was taken to the hospital that day was, ‘Can I wrestle again this year?’ One of my big dreams was to win four straight state championships.”)

Meeting and becoming buddies with fellow Wisconsin-based wrestler Ben Askren (recent 174 pound NCAA Div 1 runner-up), Matt ended up spending his post graduation summer with the Askren family when his family decided to move back to Washington. It was through Askren that Matt made the final decision to join his friend at the top-rated school, and the rest as they say, is “history” in progress. (This includes two very winning seasons where he jumped last year three weight classes to eagerly fill in an open slot at 184, an unheard of and amazingly successful

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transition).

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Having now reached partway to his ultimate goal of a national collegiate championship, Matt Pell, who is also pursuing a career in psychology, leaves behind a long line of impressed and admiring coaches for his lifelong pursuit of excellence on and off the mat.

Among the strongest of these believers is brother Nick, who made a special trip to St. Louis to sit in the first row of the Missouri section to cheer on his brother. (Nick has given up his own promising amateur career for now to pursue his own off-the-mat work options). Nick states, "While we were waiting for the matches to start, Matt expressed some concern that he had to face three tough opponents in the first three matches but I told him, 'Don't set limits for yourself. Believe you can win and you will'." One of the people that knows Matt best, Nick goes on to say, "I have total confidence he will achieve what he wants most now: a national title before he graduates."

While that ultimate goal has yet to be achieved, in typical Pell fashion, Matt explains that he already has learned major lessons from his two tournament losses.

"Greg Jones was a fantastic talent and by wrestling him I grew tremendously myself. I experienced firsthand what a championship 184-pounder can do and that in itself is a great learning experience. I will go home and study what I can do to avoid making the same mistakes next time and to reach that level of achievement whatever weight I end up competing at next season." This Pell family credo to never ever quit was further exhibited in Matt Pell's second Nationals match against Iowa's Paul Bradley, as he faced the end of the encounter with a likely tie; one point down, on the bottom, with accumulated riding time that would even the match.

"There were only three seconds left and he was weary and exhausted," reveals Nick. "Most other competitors would have said, 'This is going to overtime. I'll settle for that.' But my brother is different. He decided, 'I can win if I push myself enough.' And sure enough he made that crucial escape for the last moment victory."

A winning attitude, for sure. And a continuing quest for excellence that will surely continue unabated!

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