

God's Plan – a Wrestler Story

God has a plan for everyone. It's hard to know what it is or understand it, but God has a funny way of revealing things in time. When Hayden Filipovich won the state championship Saturday, the energy and excitement was so much fun. He's such a great kid, it couldn't have happened to a better young man. When something big like that happens, there's these small, quiet moments you have right after...these moments where things return to normal and you soak it in.

I got home to after the state finals and my wife let me know that my youngest son Nate had a basketball game in Columbus the next morning and we'd have to leave Sunday morning to get him there. I told her I needed to go to church. All the prayers I made for Hayden and for those prayers to be answered...I felt I needed to be at St. John. She told me she understood and made arrangements for Nate to ride to the game with his teammates. We came in and sat down and pastor gave us a moment for silent reflection. And in that moment I could feel the holy spirit with me, well up right inside my chest. And it hit me.

Wrestling has always been a part of me. It is something I love. It's in my blood, my fiber, my bones. I was a guy who achieved many things in the sport, captain of my team, 2nd place in dual team state, countless tournament championship brackets covered the walls of my room as a young man. I dreamed big and set my goals high and I pushed myself beyond unthinkable limits. That sport molded who I was and cast me in iron.

I was a state ranked wrestler in Illinois but I failed to reach my goals my senior year which was crushing to me. I cut a lot of weight (a lot of weight), and by the end of the season, my body just hit a wall. In the state tournament series, I was sick, worn down and slipping mentally. I lost a big match against an opponent I had beaten twice before that year and my dreams shattered in an instant.

I've had 28 years to think about what happened, why it went wrong. I remember how nervous I was. I knew how important the match was and what was on the line. I remember taking the mat feeling drained. The match started and right away I was close to getting that first takedown which would have set the tone and broke the match open for me. But my opponent played the edge of the mat and got out of bounds. I came up with nothing. That near miss got in my head. It registered in my mind as a failure and as the match went on, more near misses and frustration built up in me. We went into overtime and worn down, mentally frustrated, I got scored on and my individual wrestling career was over. All that work, all that potential...poof.

I thought I did everything right. I worked harder than anyone else, put in more than anyone else, and yet all these guys I was better than succeeded and I failed. I lost my heart, my identity and was mad at God. I walked away from the sport I loved. Turned down opportunities to wrestle in college. It may seem trivial compared to what others face in life, but to me as a young man, wrestling was such a huge part of who I was, it broke me.

Despite my failure and heartache, wrestling served me well in life. All the lessons I learned about discipline, accountability and toughness have had a huge positive impact on me. I walked through life

unafraid of challenges, unafraid of hard work. Dan Gable was right when he said, once you've wrestled, everything else is easy.

Fast forward 10 years and God blesses me with three sons (and a daughter!). When they start to grow up, we started to get involved in wrestling again. We started the wrestling program at Lutheran High 6 years ago and my goal was simply to make sure my sons had a chance to wrestle. The program struggled and hung on by a thread the first two years. But then in walks this kid, Hayden Filipovich, who has this amazing potential. Hard working, disciplined, smart and he wrestled as a kid so he had a strong foundation. I knew he would have his moment. So I studied the science behind champion mindset, the science behind peaking, performing at your best when the pressure is on...all things I had no clue about when I was an 18 year old kid. 28 years of heartache floating around somewhere deep inside me lead to a fierce determination that rivaled my days as a wrestler. When his big moment was in front of him, Hayden would be at the top of his game.

When you get to the highest levels of wrestling, the difference between a state placer and a state champ is mainly mental. Your biggest competition is you and the things that get in the way of believing in yourself. And peak performance is all about being calm, not letting nervous energy eat away at you, staying focused on only what you can control, staying in your routines and letting go.

I talked to him about what had happened in my career. I told him I got too wrapped up in achieving something, and told him I got so caught up in it, it cost me the sport I loved. I told him to wrestle because he loves it. Give it 100% and let God sort it out. The important things in life, his family, his friends and everyone who loves him, will be unchanged by the results of the match.

I talked to him about how everyone around him will be excited and they'll want to talk about the competition. They'll talk about other guy's records and stats and how he'll match up. I told him to shut it all out and stay focused on him. The past doesn't matter, the future doesn't matter. Focus on the things you can control in the moment, your intensity, your aggressiveness.

Before each match I reminded him not to make any match special. It's another day in the office. If you get scored on, focus on the next point. If you score, focus on the next point. There's nothing else to think about. Get out there and let it rip. Do what you love to do.

And most importantly, we talked about how to handle missed opportunities to score and not let it demoralize you. We talked about how the key to handling a missed opportunity to score is to register it in your mind not as a failure but rather as something you need to come back to later in the match. Remember the move you didn't convert. If you were close when the guy was fresh, that same move will score later when he's tired.

The wrestler Hayden faced in the championship was a highly skilled wrestler with a long body several inches taller than Hayden. Big blonde kid who looked like Dulph Lungren from Rocky IV. Hayden had wrestled him the year before and had lost to him. We looked at all the scores of his matches and could see 3-0, 5-0, 8-0...always 0...we knew he'd be hard to score on and matches at this level so often come down to one takedown.

In the first and second period of the championship match, Hayden was close to scoring several times. Especially at the end of the second period. He hit a nice high crotch single and he cracked his opponent down to the mat. He was close to finishing and likely would have scored if time didn't run out. Instead of scoring that takedown, he came up with nothing and went into the final period trailing 0-1.

He got cut under his eye and there was a pause before the final period for blood clean up. It gave me a chance to talk to him. I could see he was frustrated by not scoring the takedown. I said to him he's got this. I told him he's been close to scoring a takedown multiple times and his opponent hasn't been close even once. I told him to keep attacking and go back to his shot.

And sure enough, that's exactly what he did. He gets a quick escape. We're tied 1-1. He's back on his feet, grapples a bit, takes another shot and BOOM, he's right back into that crackdown position again. Only this time he's in better position and he elevates his body and fights his way out the backdoor. 2 point takedown!!! This puts him up 3-1 and in the driver's seat. His opponent gets an escape, bringing the score to 3-2 and Hayden goes to work tying up his opponent. Time starts to run out and his opponent makes one last ditch effort to score a takedown to win the match. Hayden is ready for it. He counters and puts his opponent to his back scoring another 4 points. Buzzer sounds...Hayden Filipovich is a state champ!!!

God has a plan for everyone. You go through life not knowing or understanding what it is. You try to do the best you can, you pray to God for things and you get confused when the things you ask for don't happen. But as I sat in church, I felt He revealed to me. It welled up in my chest and washed over me like a baptism. His plan for me was to bring me to this moment. Redemption in the form of helping a young man share the passion, grind and struggle that drives you to be the best man that you can be.

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