



First Place Ribbon

## Chapter 13

### Wrestling

### Winter, 1964

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Boys, learn how to use your head. It's so much easier to think your way through life than to get into fights, or break your back doing manual labor. At one point, I found myself facing a challenging situation, but I didn't panic. I kept cool and thought my way out of it. Here's what happened.

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Gerry was worried. "I'm going to flunk the science test tomorrow. And if I do, I won't be eligible to play basketball anymore. Coach Morris told me I gotta do better on my grades or I'm off the team."

I was sitting next to Gerry in a school bus heading home from a ninth grade basketball game. Everyone but Gerry was enjoying the ride. We had a good team and had just won another game.

Hearing his concern, I became worried too. Gerry was a good player and we needed him on the team. "You can study tonight," I offered.

"There's no time, I gotta work." Gerry worked nights washing dishes in the kitchen at the Holland House. He didn't work for spending money; his earnings went to his family to help out.

I thought about Gerry's situation for a few minutes, and then came up with a plan. "Gerry, what if you get sick and miss school tomorrow?" The next day was Friday. "That'll give you all weekend to study. You can take a make-up test on Monday," I suggested.

"You think Mr. Henderson will let me take the test on Monday?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" I replied. I knew Mr. Henderson. His policy was that if a student missed a test due to illness, a make-up test would be given the next day the student was in class.

"I gotta think about it." Gerry said as he sat back in his seat. A few minutes later, relief filled his face.

You might think I was just doing the right thing helping Gerry figure out how to pass his science test. But I wasn't that good of a person. And it wasn't just because we needed Gerry on the basketball team. No, the reason was more complicated.

A few weeks earlier, our PE teacher had decided it would be a great idea to have an intramural wrestling tournament at Golden Junior High. I never liked wrestling much. However, it was a very popular sport in Golden. The high-school team was always one of the best in the conference and had even produced a few state

champs. I just didn't like the idea of rolling around with some other sweaty guy, trying to hold both his shoulders to the mat for three seconds. So, it was basketball for me.

The PE coach wouldn't listen when I tried my best to avoid participating in the tournament. When I suggested that a dislocated elbow, incurred during the previous football season, was an excellent reason to sit out the tournament, he just looked at me and said, "You're playing basketball aren't you? Seems like you're all healed up." So that was that. I was in the wrestling tournament, like it or not.

I was a big kid and in the 155-pound weight class. There were only two other boys my size, Frank and Gerry. I got lucky and drew a first-round bye, which meant I didn't have to actually wrestle until the second round. So I sat on the bleachers next to Norm, one of the best wrestlers on the school team, and we watched as Frank and Gerry tied up. In what seemed like an instant, Gerry took Frank down with a leg tackle, flipped him on his back, and pinned him. A roar went up from the crowd. I gasped. Gerry was quick and strong, and I was next on his list. "Doesn't look good for you, Waters," Norm observed with a serious look in my direction. "He's gonna kill you!"

I had been panicked about wrestling Gerry until that moment on the bus. We were scheduled to wrestle for the 155-pound championship the next day. There was no make-up match if someone was sick. He forfeited.

I arrived at homeroom the morning of my scheduled wrestling match with Gerry and, much to my pleasure; his desk was empty. He was out sick. I spent the day checking his desk in every class wondering if he would show up in time to wrestle. I needn't have worried; Gerry's desk was empty all day. Later that afternoon, I was awarded the first-place ribbon for the 155-pound weight class, without wrestling a single match.

Boys, maybe you think I should feel bad about winning that ribbon, but I don't. After all, it was a win-win-win situation. Gerry took the test the following Monday and passed. He stayed on the basketball team and we continued our winning ways. And I won the wrestling ribbon without wrestling Gerry. Sometimes, you just have to use your head.