

It's a Family Thing...

I spent a very long time before I knew what I wanted to talk about tonight. It was partly because I was coming down with a case of the "overs". I told you about the "overs" last year. That's when something you really enjoyed is coming to an end, and it was great, and you loved it and now it's over and you don't want it to be over. It was also hard to decide because so many things have happened since last season and not just on the mat, but I finally found what I think we should talk about.

As I went through this process of thinking about our season, my mind kept going back to that evening in November when we stood around that little campfire in the dark and we got to know our coach a little better and we talked and maybe dreamed a little about the season that was to come. We set what I think were some pretty lofty goals there in the cold and while we may think we didn't quite achieve them all, we fought the good fight and we did nail three out of four. We might not have made it to Battle Creek but we got better everyday and very nearly surprised a lot of people. From an 0-5 start to a winning season, I think we nearly reached that first one. We said we wanted to be a class act, in nearly every way we were a very classy team and we were followed by some pretty classy fans. Next we said nobody quits and you may think we failed there. There were some people that came and went but if you look at the wrestlers that were standing around that fire on Rainbow Lake, they're all still here and we added more new faces too. So I think we achieved that one as well. Lastly, and most importantly we said we needed to be a family. There is where we were the most successful. So I decided that family is what I want to talk about tonight so first I'll tell you about mine.

We live in a different world than we did when we met here exactly a year ago. Our lives are all a little different than they were then. Not a lot different but a least a little. Maybe it's just in the way you feel when you look at a stranger, or maybe it's when they look through your bag at the Finals, I know we thought they were just looking for food but in reality they were looking for other things too. Things are just a little different. See we have the luxury of living in a place where we are pretty well insulated from a lot of the bad in the world, most of the ugliness happens a very long ways from Williamston. It doesn't really effect most of our families, at least not very often.

When I sat transfixed in front of the TV that horrible morning in September the very first thing that came to my mind was my families. You see I have more than one as do all of you. We all have our regular family. Our parents and siblings, our relatives, our dearest friends, those closest to our hearts. Then we have other family groups brought together by our interests or by fate. I know I have at least three families.

My first family is that regular family, I called them on the phone. I needed to hear their voices to know that they were all right, that they hadn't been touched by this terrible thing. Everyone was fine, their lives are much like yours, they have change a little but not a lot.

Then my thoughts quickly turned to my second family. You see I am a firefighter and as I watched that day unfold I knew that part of my family would never, ever be the same again. I know what it feels like to be the one running in when everyone else is running out. When I saw those towers collapse I knew part of my family was gone. Now when the call comes in and I run for the station there is a part of me that thinks of that day and the 343 brothers I had never met that aren't here anymore. They're gone because there is a lot of evil in the world. They're gone because they were doing the things they had trained and practiced to do. But mostly they're gone because they went to work that day and in the country you are lucky enough to live in, when something bad happens all you have to do is call and someone comes running in while you are running out. So when you see the engines or hear the sirens give a thought to that part of my family who are gone now and the rest of my family who will come when you need them.

Lastly that morning my thoughts turned to you and everyone in my wrestling family and mostly that part of my family was alright. I say mostly because I knew that there had to part of that extended family that was deeply effected on that day. Last week I found out about some of that family. When the National Wrestling Hall of Fame hands out this years honors in June they are presenting three posthumous Medals of Courage to people who played a big part on that awful day. You may have heard the name Jeremy Glick. He was one of the passengers on Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvanina, he was also an All-State wrestler from New Jersey, and along with a small group of passengers, they defeated the hijackers and saved many, many lives. The other two I know you never heard of, neither had I, but they were members of two of my families, wrestling, and firefighting. Raymond Downey wasn't a wrestler but he raised two sons who were high school state champions and collegiate wrestlers at Hofstra University, he was also the Chief of Special Operations for the Fire Department of New York, and was one of the Commanders that died trying to save others. And the last is Mark Whitford, a Pennsylvania State Champion and an NCAA qualifier from Seton Hall University. Mark was the Engineer for Engine Co. #23 in Manhattan. The Engineer is the guy that runs the truck, his job was to stay with that truck, but he called his wife and then he abandoned his post to enter the World Trade Center to ensure the safety of others and he never came out. They all sound like they learned the lessons that wrestling teaches and then some. Guys like these make me proud to be a part of both of those families.

Now, let's talk about our family here in this room and beyond, and we truly are a family. It may be because we spend more time together from November until March than most conventional families do in a year. It may be because wrestling is such an emotional roller coaster that we have so many shared experiences bonding us together together. I don't know, but I do know there is something about this sport that brings people tightly together and I'm not talking about Casey's headlock or Andy's wing and a half. What I am talking about is the ties between all of the members of our family and how they all deserve your love and appreciation.

We have an awfully big extended family. Your grandmas and grandpas, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Some of them are part of your regular family and some of them are people you may never know. Whether they follow us on the web site or travel the state to watch us compete they are a pretty loyal bunch. People like Miss Vant, Mr. Mahaney, and the voice of the Hornets, Mr. Monette. They have been following wrestling for more years than they are willing to admit. Or the alumni who show up in the wrestling room looking for a little go. Devin's Grandma in New York who is always waiting for an e-mail or Casey's Aunt & Uncle who flew in from California for the finals. All of these people are a big part of our family.

Then how about your parents. If it weren't for them we wouldn't have much of a team. They are there when you win and more importantly when you lose. They take care of you when you are hurt or sick. They get you where you need to go with what you need to compete, unless you forget something, and then they go back and get it for you. They man the kitchen and they work your tournaments. But mostly they love you, unconditionally.

Next there are the guys that are there for you nearly everyday. I don't know whether to call them your uncles, big brothers, or friends. I think they are all of that and then some. All of the guys who come in to share their knowledge and time to improve your skills. Guys like Coaches Pierson and Strick who gave you someone to roll with and to learn with. Coach Therrian helping you get ready for the finals and giving you a little advice as you advanced. Coach Bloom, despite the fact that he's kind of decrepit, strapped on all of his hardware and rolled with the big guys. Coach Simmons is there for you when you compete and even if he tells you a few things you might not want to hear you know he's just trying to make you wrestle up to or above your potential and I think he knows a little about coaching wrestlers to the absolute top of their potential. And even myself, giving you a listening ear, a little advice, and making sure no one missed the bus or forgot the tape for your shoes. We are all happy to be a part of your family.

Then there are your Big Daddies. Coach Coughlin is the newest member of the family and I know he is absolutely thrilled to play a part in the successes that we had this year and the ones that are yet to come. Coach Fedewa just joined us this year as well and I think he fit right in. He still seems a little amazed that all he has to do is ask for things and the rest of the family will see that they happen. He showed us that he wears his heart on his sleeve from the moment we met him and he is truly passionate about our sport. I hope he's a part of the family for a long, long, time, but if he sucks me into one more of his little fabrications I'm going to quit believing him all together.

Now finally lets talk about you, the siblings in our family. I'll start with our littlest brothers, Tyler and Bradley. You guys are our ties to the future and you both have the ability to be leaders of our team, so hone your skills and bring your buddies and we will continue to be a team other teams are concerned with. Next there are the little brothers, whether you're a freshmen or just new to our mat, you worked hard, you learned and you improved. Just listen to the advice from the rest of the family and work a little harder and you will be major contributors to our success. Our little sisters are pretty special to the family too, it takes a lot of heart to put it all on the line and Sarah you showed us that heart time after time. Being a middle brother can be pretty hard but you won't be stuck there in the middle after tonight. It's time to grow up and be the leaders of your team. I think you are very capable and will take us to the places we want to go. That brings us to our big brothers and they are why I have that case of the "overs".

Steve, Andy, Kevin, Casey, Kevin, and Mike, we've all been together for a very long time. We have been to the top together and we been pretty close to the bottom together, but most of the ride was sure a whole lot of fun. You went from being those nervous little brothers to being the confident big brothers that were the role models for the team. In your four years you had a dual meet record of 68-26, won numerous invitational titles including winning the Jim Mooney Williamston Classic twice something a team from home had never done. You won the District Championship four years running, not many teams can claim that. You won a Regional and a State Final, the first boys from Williamston to do that in 59 years. You have a lot to be proud of!

Duf and Biz you both have a great work ethic. You were there day in and day out for all four years. You worked hard and helped others work hard and while you may not have reached all of your personal goals you had a hand in helping your team and your teammates achieve more than they could have without you. When I think of you Kevin I'll see you cranking on a headlock and hear you wheezing just a little. And Steve I'll always remember you in some funky position with your shoulder about to pop out of the socket and I'll remember watching you wrestle like a madman in the Honor Roll meet so you could end your career with a win.

Big Mike Rice it was fun to watch you turn into one of the best big guys we have ever had at Williamston. I saw you go from a doughy freshman getting beat on by Wheeker everyday to an All-Stater, to losing that last heartbreaker in overtime. Mike I will remember you as the guy who could sweat off an entire weeks weight gain in a single practice, I'll think of the throws and the double legs, but mostly I'll remember explaining that the Mackinac bridge doesn't go to Mackinac Island.

Kevin Sharp you're a guy who was always looking for the easy way but you were just looking because you knew you had to follow the right path. I saw you turn into a real leader, I saw you on the top of your game and I saw you in the deepest of holes. I hope I helped you realize that this sport will always be a part of who you are and that all of the challenges were worth while. I'll think of you as the crankiest wrestler on weigh-in day. I'll think of a single leg draped over your head at some bizarre angle and I'll see that little grin when you're trying to get away with something.

Casey you have been a great asset to our team. You could be counted on. Counted on to get the win, work harder, help a teammate, be a leader and be a friend. You're a scholar both on and off the mat. You learned from your practice partner and you learned from every match you wrestled. I'll remember you getting beaten by Perrin time after time and I'll remember watching you taking all of the things you had learned from those loses and then using them to beat him and once you had beaten him I knew you would never lose to him again. I'll see the headlocks and the throws, and I will never forget watching your Dad celebrate when you won your title. And remember we might just be family, I was unexpected and your Grandpa was the milkman.

Now it's time to talk about the that slightly ruffled blonde kid. The one who usually stands by the coach yelling to his teammates. The little brother who never let the shadow of his big brother shade him too much. The little brother who became the biggest brother on this team. The one who never lost in High School, ever. Andy you went out the same way you came in, as number one. You never missed a match because you were hurt or sick, you just wrestled through it. You hardly ever even missed a practice. You pushed your team to be the best that they could. You got angry when you thought they didn't work hard enough and you learned to recognize when they had given their very best. Now it's time for you to get the recognition that you have earned. So come on up and I've got a couple of presentations for you.

CLASSIC PLAQUE

WRESTLING CLUB PLAQUE

Andy when I think of you I'll remember you as a little boy with a medal around your neck. I'll remember the hook and the half, the front headlock, a power half with your dad yelling hard, hard, and you looking up at the ref trying get your opponent to do something. I'll remember that smile when you were frustrated on the mat and that little tear on the awards stand. But mostly I'll remember the hugs, we rarely see each other without a hug and that's a good thing.

Well I have probably said more than enough but I want you to take these things away with you tonight:

Be grateful you live in this place and in this country. Think of that every time you hear the National Anthem.

Be grateful there are people that are willing to put it all on the line for you. Think of that when you hear a siren.

Be grateful for all of your families. Think of that when you hug your parents.

Hug your parents, hug your family, hug your teammates, hug your friends, hell every once in awhile hug a stranger. If the toughest high school wrestler in history can be a hugger so can you.

Now you probably noticed that I took a few pictures over the course of the season. Well I took those pictures, over a thousand shots, and I made CDs for all of you, and if you look through them all I'm pretty sure there are pictures of everyone on the team. Thank you for always making me welcome as a part of your team.

And lastly remember "If you think you can or if you think you can't you're right". In the most important things we thought we could and we did!

THANK YOU