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*Phil Smith Symposium*

GOT LOVE FOR THE PEOPLE WHO GOT LOVE FOR ME: SHARED  
PRACTICES AND PUBLIC SCHOOLING<sup>1</sup>

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I entered high school in 1980, barely five feet tall and ninety-seven pounds soaking wet. My dad had been killed three years earlier, and I felt that the world forever owed me something. He was the center of my orbit, the son of cotton pickers with herculean strength and a foul mouth. He hunted and fished, swallowed tobacco juice “for the hair on his nuts,” and fixed his “own goddamn cars.” They tell me he played football with the heart of a giant, and I witnessed him trace out countless baseball diamonds with startling agility for an older man of twenty-seven and a forty-four-inch waist. He loved me and Momma and “them two other young’uns of his,” he’d say, but his self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy fueled a short temper that often sent me and Momma literally running for our lives. So, my eleven-year-old fragile sense of reality and all the promise that my papa portended for me as a growing young man were lowered into the ground with his charred body. My momma remarried an earring-wearing, nuts and bolts salesman only eight months after Daddy died. Feeling betrayed, I resented her and the pot-smoking lounge lizard she married, which only increased my sense of loneliness at a time when I needed her most. I couldn’t understand it then, but I’m sure now that at twenty-eight and with three kids under the age of eleven, her need for stability and the lure of a counter-culture style were most pressing to her. So it was that I began high school fatherless and emotionally volatile. Greer High School assigned me a father who inspired a love of disciplined excellence and forever changed my life.

That the school issued me a father is hyperbole, of course. The school’s ninth-grade academic advisor assigned me to first-period Earth Science taught by Coach Sloan, a thirty-seven-year-old, god-fearing man with a master’s degree in geology and a chest so hairy he had to shave himself a neckline every morning. He had been my physical education teacher in middle school, and I respected him for two reasons. He swung around bricklayer forearms that screamed functional strength. He would demonstrate this strength—and always proper technique—by climbing a twenty-foot rope, hand over fist, slowly to the ceiling and back down again, no legs. He would scale an

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eight-foot pegboard that started eight feet off the ground, patiently hitting every peg-hole coming and going. This strength was used for justice, too. Every so often, he'd have to snatch up the scruff of hard-to-deal-with bullies disrupting his gym class, while using the other forearm calmly to direct the rest of us to "stretch, don't bounce." Coach demanded that everybody participate and held you accountable if you didn't. And you had better not laugh or ridicule anybody for trying his or her best, either. Period-long invisible chair, monkey-rolls, and ladder push-ups quickly solved both of these problems. I respected him more, though, because he was a fair, even-tempered human being who appreciated pubescent humor. (In fact, he is the origin of several middle school stunts that I have since passed along to my own children.) But, that was gym, a domain in which I was successful, comfortable, and confident. Gym served as my refuge from the academic assault on my self-esteem. Gym required that I merely play, and the teacher was pleased with my play. Earth Science, along with the rest of those subjects that didn't live in the gym, was a different matter altogether. It wasn't that I lacked potential, but the potential I brought with me to school wasn't valued very highly.

For example, I grew up to three generations of white trash, "lint-heads" who didn't have a pot to piss in nor a bed to slide it under. What we did have was a stubborn pride in a puritan work ethic and in the fact that we were clean and fed every night. We also possessed demons of failure that typically torture the poor. Like I mentioned, I had witnessed my father batter my mother countless times, always over money and always taunted by the implication that he was a "no-count-son-of-a-bitch" who couldn't provide for his family. Once his rage destroyed his external world, it ricocheted inward as he banged his head into the wall until it bled. I had watched my grandfather spend the last ten years of his life slowly dying of blood loss through a hole he had drank into his stomach with vodka. He consumed it daily to sedate himself from coughing out thirty years worth of cotton dust. On the day we buried him, my grandmother told me that he was always bitter that she had been promoted to weaving supervisor over him and the rest of the men. When it was all said and done, the vodka dulled his sense of emasculation, and, more importantly, I would imagine, the fact that after thirty years of working their asses off, none of them would do no better than warping and weaving thread for a meager living. The "Mill-Hill" had various ways of reminding us of this latter sense. And whether through pills or paint, through stealing or simply giving up, we all found ways to endure the futile, and usually to the effect of debasing ourselves even more. My daddy's way out of this futility was football. He said that it would even take me to Clemson. Of course, this was a few years after I shot that gun in the house, which was the reason I ended up playing football in the first place.

When I was seven, I took out a .357 caliber handgun that my daddy kept in his chest-of-drawers and accidentally shot it inside the house. Normally, my daddy would have whipped me for not doing what he told me to do, which was "don't touch the gun," but this particular time, he gave me the option of a

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whipping or playing midget league football. Playing football didn't seem to have anything to do with not following my daddy's directions. This option didn't make sense to me at all, and the ensuing events associated with it were just as strange and illogical as the option itself.

By mid-day, a full set of football pads sat in my closet, along with a new Riddell helmet that my daddy got for himself. Weeks passed without one mention of me shooting the gun or of football. Then, one Saturday around noon, I was up at my grandma's house watching *Fat Albert* when my daddy came in with all of the equipment and said, "Put your stuff on, boy, let's go." He had laid out a wooden board in my grandma's backyard and was standing at the end opposite me with his helmet on and a wad of tobacco in his mouth. He then threw a football to me and told me to run at him as hard as I could, which I did. His forearm knocked my facemask into my throat, and the entire impact lifted me slightly upward and then snapped me to the ground flat on my back. At first all I saw was green, and I would have puked from the horror if all the wind had not been knocked out of me. Then, my daddy was standing over me screaming, "Get up, get your fucking ass up," tobacco juice dripping onto my facemask and then into my face. My momma and grandma came outside immediately. My grandma picked me up and held me close to her chest and took me into the kitchen. From the kitchen window, I could see my momma and daddy fighting in the yard, Momma crying and calling my daddy a stupid son-of-a-bitch and my daddy crying, himself, and shoving Momma off of him. At some point right before he snatched open the kitchen door, I heard him say, "He's got to learn that when the wolf comes to the door, he'd better eat the son-of-a-bitch." Now, as if the situation wasn't traumatic enough, the Big Bad Wolf was somehow involved. To a seven-year-old who still believed in Santa Claus, this was serious. I knew the story of the Three Little Pigs. So, my introduction to metaphor came the hard way, and this particular metaphor foretold of many uncertain threats to come. My daddy attacked metaphor with its variant: the simile. He said that I had best "run at that motherfucker like a rabid dog," and he made damn sure that my attitude was all or nothing. And if nothing, fast slaps to the side of the head immediately followed. This became true for almost every "wolf" I faced, whether that be recoiling the hose, holding the flashlight for him, or blocking big Curtis Thompson. Daddy said, "I don't care if he knocks every fucking tooth out of your head, you'd better keep fighting his ass until you are a bloody spot on the ground." I learned quick and came to crave the contact because this earned Daddy's approval. "See," he would say, "you can do anything you put your mind to." Well, not anything. Take school, for instance.

I tried, I really did, but I wasn't very good at school. I was a slow reader and counted on my fingers. I had a truck driver's vocabulary and no strategy for decoding words. I stumbled greatly when reading aloud, creating a divided self, one who hears himself sounding out words on a page and doing it badly. My focus wandered. The stories made no sense. Then, I would just give up and endure whatever embarrassment I deserved. My momma, who had been

a good student, tried to read *Harriet The Spy* with me at home, but this was once every blue moon or so. We always started again with the first page and never made it past the second. I would stammer, stutter, and butcher words until she jerked the book from me and stabbed an impatient finger into the page. “Read the damn words that are there,” she would say, and then begin forcefully reading the story herself until her disgust stopped her somewhere along the second page. But after several episodes of this, I would listen to her cadence and memorize what she read aloud and then would repeat this while looking back at the pages. This strategy worked. It fooled her long enough to think that I was improving as a reader. If I needed help, I really went to my grandma. She helped me memorize the multiplication table. I also learned proportion, fraction, and ratio from watching her cook every Sunday morning. My understanding of these things, however, was more qualitative than quantitative. The school required something more exact than “to taste” or “you’ll know it when it is right.” The most exact I could give the school was doing “exactly” as I was told to do. To my daddy, being a good student meant following directions and behaving myself, which wasn’t what Ms. Poole or Ms. Doolittle, for instance, quite had in mind. It didn’t matter in the long-run, anyway. By the time I started the sixth grade, my daddy’s standard and threat had been buried with him. I began to give in to tantrum no matter where I was and whom I was with. By the time I entered high school, I had lost all confidence in the belief that I could do anything I set my mind to, and there was no one left to demand that I be the best at anything. This is where Coach Sloan comes in.

Earth Science had little to do with anything, really. I did well in his class, often at the expense of my other academic responsibilities. His class had priority and typically, I spent all my weeknights slowly reading, re-reading, and memorizing the material he assigned so that I could demonstrate how ready and eager I was the first thing in the morning. Many mornings he would have to hold me off to give other people a chance, and when no other student would offer an answer, he would say, “Alright Hewitt, tell’em.” This just gave me license to blurt out answers at will. One day, he “nipped it in the bud,” as he liked to say, and gave me a detention. He told me to meet him at the gym. This was double jeopardy. Not only had I turned him against me now, but I had football practice right after school, and a detention would make me late for practice, adding another mile of running on top of our ladder-sprints. When I met him after school, though, he didn’t mention the detention at all. He told me to follow him into the locker room and stand up on the scale. “Oh hell,” I thought, “what strange punishment have I brought on?” But, all he said was, “Good, see you tomorrow.” The next morning, after class, he called me up to his desk. “Coach Few said that you are a little man who plays football with a big heart. He also said that big heart needs something to do. I need somebody with a big heart to wrestle at 112 lbs. You think you could eat enough to gain 10 lbs.?” First of all, I knew nothing of wrestling. “Yes sir,” I said, thinking

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that he can't be serious. That scale had read 97 lbs. yesterday, and I was fully clothed. "Well, you can go at a lower weight if you want to, but you will have to beat Drummond at 98 lbs. and Smith at 105 lbs. I need somebody at 112 lbs. If you can gain 10 lbs. before December, you will be underweight for the 112 lbs. class, but you will weigh enough to wrestle at that weight." I said, "I'll do my best." He then smacked me on the side of the head with some rolled-up papers in his hand. "Boy," he said with a wink, "wait 'till I call on you next time." My identity changed the Monday after football season.

Wrestling practice began at 3:30 in a portable right outside the boys' locker room. A gas unit heater that hung in the corner by the first door provided the sweltering 100° heat whereby we boys could stretch, loosen up, and cut weight. It ran the entire practice. A faint bleach smell left from Coach mopping the mats everyday before practice competed and lost daily with the wet-dog smell of unwashed shirts, shorts, and stocking caps waved around vigorously from end to end. Stains of dried spit decorated the walls near the two trashcans set out for the very purpose of body-fluid collection. There were 21 of us, including Coach Sloan: three seniors, four juniors, two sophomores, and eleven freshmen. One of the seniors was a state runner-up, the other two were last year's third-place finishers in their respective weight classes. Nobody else had a credential to speak of, well, except the freshman Robert Drummond whose two older brothers had been state champions four years before he got to high school. 98 lbs., therefore, was not an option for me. Neither was 105 lbs. because I simply was too afraid of the sixteen-year-old freshman claiming that spot. He was a rough-and-tumble kid whose clothes reeked of kerosene. He had six fingers on each hand and would turn his eyelids inside out to chase people around at lunchtime. He wasn't that athletic nor skilled at wrestling, just governed by a nasty mean streak that suggested he would stop at nothing until he was satisfied. Of course, I was always paired with him, and if he got pissed off, he got dirty real fast. He once shit on himself—and me—in the middle of practice because I took him down. I guess I could have challenged him at 105 lbs., but it was just easier to go unchallenged at 112 lbs. In the long-run, 112 lbs. wasn't as easy as I thought it would be.

Coach had just a few rules: be on time, work your tail off, and no cussing. His philosophy was straight-forward. Wrestling is a metaphor for living life. Life is a contest, a struggle against forces that will put you on your back and submit you in a skinny minute. And these forces never stop, never cease. Just when you think you have them in your grip, they slip out and away, only to reappear at some unexpected angle, more voracious and always with an advantage. There is no beating them in any final sense. The best we can do is fight them, inch by inch, second by second. You will win here and lose there, and if you are lucky, you will win more than you lose. But, it's not all chance. Winning begins in the heart and mind. A wrestler who is all body and no mind is one too controlled by emotions, too reckless and careless at the wrong time. One who is all mind has ideals that will never be reached; there is no vehicle with fuel to take him there. The one who seeks the proper balance between

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heart and mind is given the title of athlete. And this title is earned, day in and day out, from practice to practice, from breath to breath. The term “athlete,” too, is an ideal, a mark by which to guide ourselves, not only at practice or in a match but in everything we do. To Coach, being an athlete required certain practiced behaviors. Never cut corners; wrestle through the whistle. Do it now, not later. Eat good things for your body. Rest. Focus. Create the conditions that make all of the above possible. You pick two moves to make your own, one defensive, the other offensive, and you make these habitual, routine, done in your sleep. He taught the square and staggered stance in the up-right position. Never cross leg over leg. Wrestle aggressively and with power. He emphasized the basics: the single and double leg, the high-crotch, fireman’s carry, the duck-under, and the head-lock were his take-down moves. Freshmen should never tie-up with opponents unless we knew for certain that we were stronger; otherwise we would end up on our backs quickly and get pinned. He taught us to pancake when the opponent shot in deep. The wizard had multiple counter applications. The near-arm and far-arm breakdowns, ankle hooked, were our standards. Once our opponent was flat on his stomach, we attempted to turn him with the half-nelson, clutching the wrist that we just broke down with the near or far arm breakdown. “Get perpendicular and run it,” Coach would yell out. If you could get the head to crescent back to the opponent’s far leg, then locking in the cradle ensured a difficult escape and likely a pin. The head was the key. If you control the head, the body will have to follow. We spent a tremendous amount of time on controlling the head. A hard cross-face (that is, a swift swipe of the forearm across the opponent’s face) while picking the far ankle would crank his head and neck toward his shoulder and take away his one foot as a point of balance, thus crumbling him into a cross-face cradle, the result being the same as the half-nelson cradle. Pressure on the back of the neck forced his head down to the mat, setting up a power half. We spent just as much time strengthening our necks and keeping our heads up as counters to these moves. And the defensive counters were the standards, too: the pop-up, the stand-up, the sit-out, and the switch. But, the first order of business was conditioning. You simply had to be in the kind of shape that allowed you to go all out for three 120-second periods. Running, monkey-rolls, crab-crawls, push-ups, sit-ups, jump rope, repeat. We completed a weightlifting circuit twice a week, light to moderate weight, as many reps as possible over a specified time that Coach set. To say I pushed myself would be lying; I simply tried to make it day-to-day, cutting corners when and where I needed to.

I went 6-19 my freshman year, beating three people twice each for the six wins. I lost twelve matches by pin—six in the first period. Opponents simply muscled me around. On my back with ninety seconds left in the first period, I simply didn’t have the strength and energy to keep fighting, so I gave up. It’s one thing to lose by pin, but it’s another to just give up. Coach, my teammates, girls in the stands, Momma, they all seemed to know I quit. And

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most importantly, my daddy wouldn't have accepted it. He would have been ashamed. I was ashamed, humiliated.

Coach Sloan told me to keep my head up; I was a freshman, after all. This didn't work at all. He then said that I should challenge Smith at 105 lbs. and wrestle there. I did and won that spot. But now, I had to make that weight every meet, which meant I had to drop 2 pounds for weigh-ins. I could make my weight the day before in practice, but it was staying at the weight over the course of the night and next school day that I mismanaged. I would go home and eat beans and rice, bread, butter, and then eat nothing the next day while at school. I typically would be a ½ lb. over and then spit off the rest through the course of the day. But I now faced a string of polished, seasoned 105 lb. opponents. One of these opponents was James Black, who had beaten me at 112 lbs. and now had dropped to 105 lbs. to be competitive for the state championship.

On the day of the meet, I was a ½ lb. over weight, and at official weigh-ins, I was a ½ over. We had an hour before the meet to cut the weight. So, I put on a trash bag, sweatshirts, and ran the perimeter of the gym. I would then sneak water to keep my weight slightly over, intentionally trying not to make my weight while appearing like I was trying. I simply didn't want to be humiliated again. I didn't make the weight, but Coach made me wrestle Black anyway in a preliminary match before the Varsity match. Physically upset with me, he didn't say a word until after the match. "You will stay after practice for the rest of the season," he said as I got off the bus in the school's parking lot.

Punishment on top of humiliation? I quit right here and now. Who cares! My daddy's dead and my momma? What's she going to do, ground me? Of course, I didn't say any of this to Coach Sloan. I just looked at the ground and kept walking. I told my momma that he was making me stay after practice for the rest of the season for not making my weight. How unfair! I told her I wasn't going back either. "Your daddy didn't raise no quitter," she said, stunned that I would ever suggest such a thing. "Well, Daddy ain't here, is he?" I said.

For the next two days, I didn't offer up anything in class. I kept my eyes on the desktop. Coach called on me, twice, and I just shrugged like I had no idea. In fact, I didn't. I hadn't bothered to read for *Earth Science*. I also didn't go to practice, and he said nothing. After the second day, my momma told me that if I didn't go on Monday, I shouldn't bother coming back to her house. The threat didn't bother me; I would just go live with my grandma.

On Monday morning, I entered Coach's class, stared at the blank piece of paper I had taken out for notes. He didn't call on me, and, again, I didn't offer up anything. "Good," I thought. "I can finally settle into the fact that I don't have to wrestle anymore." This sense of acceptance lasted the entire first period. Right at the bell and in front of everybody, Coach said, "Hewitt, I need to talk to you." He waited until everyone left and then locked the door. "Why weren't you at practice the past two days?" The foreboding made me well up with tears, and I simply kept my eyes to the ground. "I didn't feel good," I said.

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“Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t feel good?” I was emotionally confused. I didn’t know whether to cry or cuss him out and quit school altogether. “Well, your momma told me you quit the team. Is this true?” I nodded “yeah.” “Why?” Feeling like a trapped rat, I said nothing.

“Look, son. If this is about you having to stay after practice, then I stand by that. Ms. Clayton saw you drinking water when you were supposed to be getting weight off. You get nowhere in life cutting corners. You only cheat yourself by doing that. Everything’s earned and usually the hard way. And quitters don’t ever earn anything. In fact, they never win at nothing in their lives. Are you one of these people?”

I said nothing and never raised my head. By now, though, tears escaped my eye sockets and fell like rain drops on the tops of my shoes.

“Well, I don’t think you are. Your football coaches don’t think you are. And I don’t think you come from quitters, either. It’s not who you are. The boys don’t think that’s who you are. They’ve been asking about you: ‘What’s wrong with Hewitt, he all right?’ But, I will leave it up to you. There comes a time in our lives when we can’t be and do what our mommas and daddies and friends want us to do. We have to decide for ourselves what we are going to stand for and who we are going to be. So, I will leave it to you to decide who you are going to be, and I will have to respect whatever you decide.”

Students in his second period were now banging on the door and jumping up to look through the window.

Through sobs, I finally got out that I was getting no better, I kept getting pinned, which made me feel like a loser.

“You’re young yet, son. Nobody expects you to go out there and beat seniors. You’re losing matches not because of potential. You are losing matches because they are simply muscling you around. We can work on strength and conditioning and staying off your back. But you have to decide if you want to commit to it and to the belief that hard work and intelligence pays off in the end. It’s not going to happen overnight, and it’s not going to happen ‘cause we are standing here talking about it. Just like I tell y’all in practice: you can’t think that because you simply try a move once that it’s going to work. You got to keep moving, you got to keep trying.”

By now, the bell had rung, and I was late to Algebra. Coach told me to “get my butt to practice.” He wrote me a pass to class. “Oh, Hewitt, I ain’t going to forget about you staying after practice.”

I was back out there to a chorus of hoots and hollers. I stayed at 112 lbs. for the rest of the season. For the first week, I along with seven other teammates who had misbehaved, plus the three seniors who had a chance to win the state championship, labored through a variety of conditioning drills. For the remaining three weeks, it was just Coach and I. Fifteen minutes of sit-ups, crab-crawls, or wind-sprints, and 30 minutes of wrestling Coach Sloan himself.

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“Look,” he said one day. “The first step to fixing any problem is a realistic assessment of the situation. You can’t fix what you don’t understand. And you can’t let it hurt your feelings—let ego or some image of yourself get in the way. You got to risk looking like a fool before you can improve at anything. Now, when you look at why you lose, what do you see?”

“Well, they just throw me around like a rag-doll,” I answered.

“Which tells you what?”

I said that I needed to get stronger, to which he added, “and in better conditioning such that conditioning never becomes a concern. At the top end, the Liptacks, the James Blacks, the Rosemonds, they all are in top shape. They could wrestle full-speed ‘till the cows come home. So, they are not focused on their own huffin’ and puffin’ but on what the other wrestler is giving them. They are reading the energy flow. You are similar to Liptack and Drummond. You are not going to overpower or out muscle most wrestlers, so your approach has to be different. Most wrestlers are trying to manhandle their opponent. What do I tell y’all about takedowns? Be aggressive, attack, right? Well, being aggressive also can get you into trouble. You get overly aggressive, you get out of position and out of balance. You then can use their own force against them. I see you as a counter-wrestler. You have good overall balance, a good sense of time and mat awareness. We have to use these strengths and minimize your weaknesses.

For the remaining three weeks, Coach would play the bully, and my role was first to feel the push, plane, and angle of his force, and then I would use that force to pull him through his target, forcing him out of position. Head drags, arm drags, ankle picks, side-rolls were my weapons. I modified my upright stance so I could sweep to the side of opponents instead of getting caught up in shots where their weight and legs could be used against me. And then we practiced getting off my back. Keeping a good, stout base, head up, knees wide, and exploding out of the move was the start. Better use of my legs, working myself out of bounds, and just fighting harder and longer helped, too. I lost the last four matches of the season but not because I was pinned: a moral victory that carried over into my sophomore season.

As expected, my second year as a wrestler turned out to be an improvement over the first but not by much. I had solidified the respect of my teammates through a grueling football season together. Our JV team had only 15 players, and most of us played the entire game, never coming off the field. We were undersized and often out matched, but we found ways to win, mostly through heart. I had intercepted two balls and caught the winning pass with the time expired against our cross-town rivals, kids we all had played football with since second grade. This is to say I was considered a “player,” a title I took as an expression of love bestowed on me by my black teammates, some of whom wrestled. Let me explain.

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I started first grade in 1971 as a part of only the third class my elementary school integrated, which was across the railroad tracks in the black neighborhood called Sunnyside. Most Americans typically think of school integration as black, Asian, or Latino students bused into schools with a majority of white students. However, I, along with all the other kids on my side of the tracks, went to a poorly-funded elementary school in working-class Sunnyside. Attending a predominantly black school as a white minority quickly disabused me of any idea I may have had about inherent superiority based on my skin color. This lesson was omnipresent. I stammered and stuttered with the “Buzzards” reading group, while many of my black classmates soared with the “Eagles.” I struggled to count with my fingers, while Kenny, Vicky, Lisa, and Matt could add and subtract quantities in a moment’s glance. My clothes were often stained, worn, and slept in for the fourth night in a row, which was a point of ridicule. And where it really mattered to me, in physical activity, my physical size, speed, and strength caused my black counterparts to look me up and down contemptuously and exclaim, “Bitch, please!” Crying to my father was of no use. As I mentioned, he gave no shelter to “yellow-bellied quitters.” And I sure as shit wanted my own father’s love. “They got it just as hard as we do. They work for fucking pennies, struggle to keep their lights on, their babies fed, and their shit from being repossessed. On top of that, they got to work twice as hard as anybody else to earn respect just because of the color of their skin. You can lay down and quit or you can prove their asses wrong. Best you prove their asses wrong.” My black classmates, though, particularly my fellow athletes, weren’t giving me nothing, especially because I was white. They forced me to earn, by quality of performance, every bit of adulation I received. So, inviting me into their homes to dance at their parties, telling their friends, “He’s all right for a white boy” meant something to me. And this camaraderie carried over into and was intensified through wrestling.

The season itself was mediocre for me. My record improved to 12-8. I got better at being a counter-wrestler, and didn’t lose one match by pin, and no loss was by more than 5 points. I was third in our conference. I beat the opponents I was expected to beat but could not compete with the elite in the 121 lb. weight class. I just wasn’t polished enough and, more importantly, didn’t think I belonged among the elite. Therefore, when wrestling Barry Norris or James Black, I didn’t push when I could have because I believed I would lose anyway and possibly get myself into trouble (that is, on my back). I was happy enough progressing toward every mediocre wrestler’s goal of making it to the state tournament, which, for this particular year, was 5 hours away, requiring an overnight stay. I took part in plenty of warm-up discussions about whopping it up at the state meet. But, I didn’t make it.

The qualifying tournament was set up in a “piggy-back” format. As long as you kept winning or as long as the person who beat you kept winning, you kept progressing toward state qualification. I lost my first match, won the second, then lost to Barry Norris in a competitive 4-0 match. He took me down

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and escaped from me. This was a big leap for me, even if it was a loss. He was a state finalist the year before. However, the kid who piggybacked on his back beat the person I beat first, and then I lost. It turned out that Minton, a person I had beaten twice my freshman year and again this year, got the final qualifying spot and I didn't. The world just ended. It felt like my daddy had died all over again. My friends were going without me, and I cried all the way home. Momma suggested that I ask Coach Sloan to let me go with the team. Impulsively, I called him at 10:30 that same night, sobbing. Calm, calculated, and understanding, he said he would see what he could do. He told me to meet him in the coaches' office on Monday morning.

Overly anxious, I was at the school a full hour before Coach got there. Sensing my unease, he immediately said to quit pacing, I was going with them. But, we needed to figure out why all this emotional disorder continued to happen each year.

"Hewitt," he said, "you have every bit the potential as any of those kids who made it to the state tournament, any of them. You have the potential to be a fine athlete. What separates you from the rest of those boys is that they see themselves as athletes and carry themselves as such in everything they do. They not only take every opportunity to improve themselves, they seek out adverse situations just to test themselves. You have to learn to trust your abilities, trust that what you are graced with and that your deep desire to be the best you possibly can be will make you a winner. A person can't ask no more of you; you can't ask no more of yourself than to give everything you have inside you to be the best you can be. And this goes for everything you do. A champion, son, is not just a winner on the mat; he is a winner at everything he puts his heart to, even if he doesn't always win the trophy. Consistency of belief in yourself, in carrying yourself as an athlete is something I can't give you. That's something that has to come from you."

I was so overwhelmed with relief that I hugged him and told him I loved him. And I truly did. He had just encouraged in me the same thing that my daddy had tried to encourage in me: "you can do anything you put your mind to." However, Coach didn't beat this into me; he breathed life into a spirit that laid dormant and that I thought I had no control over. Coach was my dad, and I was his champion.

I started that afternoon. I had PE the last period of the day and went to swab the mats before practice. Putting the mop bucket back into the closet, I spotted an old projector and a box full of cartridges, each hand-labeled with wrestling moves. Each tape depicted a particular move three times at full speed and then three times in slow motion, no sound, just instructions scripted across the bottom of the frames. At first, I watched moves that I knew well, trying to find the slightest difference in angle and movement from my own. The arm drag, for instance, was a block-n-drag move. But, I noticed that as soon as the wrestler flashed a hand forward, the opponent quickly initiated the block/drag in one fluid movement. Mine had been halting, unsure, leaving a split-second opportunity for counter. My sit-out served as my defensive "bread and butter."

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But the better wrestlers I faced would counter simply by following behind me, never allowing me to get perpendicular to them, even if I hit the move eight to ten times in a row. This is how Norris and Black countered the sit-out. I watched the sit-out tape, letting it loop over and over, day after day, until I finally paid attention to an important note in the scripted instruction: “For modification, see granby roll.” And there it was: the key to the counter. The tape showed in demonstration and in script that the sit-out didn’t need perfect angle; the sit-out was the set-up for slight angle variation. If the opponent trailed behind but was a forearm’s width behind in the timing of his trail, this lag was enough room for the defensive wrestler to sit-out in flurries to put the offensive wrestler in a reactionary mode, creating enough of a timing gap to slip a forearm through to scoop the offensive wrestler’s leading leg, leading not only to a reversal but putting the opponent on his back—a 5-point move. Another tape labeled “Advanced Granby” demonstrated a tricky, dangerous, and bewildering nuance to the basic version. The nuance worked off of the same set-up, a flurry of sit-outs to create slight separation, arm though gap, but instead of pulling through, the wrestler was to roll across the top of his shoulder blades, pivoting hips and legs through to clear space. These two versions of the granby became my own. I practiced them at home watching TV, before breakfast, before bed, in the bed, at friends’ houses. I wrestled Coach over and over, setting him up again and again. He couldn’t stop this move. I practiced arm drags with anyone wanting to shake my hand: the principal, Ms. Sloan, members of the Jaycees. I jumped rope and ran miles wrapped in plastic trash bags. I practiced the rest of the year and all summer long, constantly thinking that Rosemond, Norris, and Black were doing the same thing as I was right now and that I just needed to go harder and longer. I went to wrestling camp. I drove myself to practice with the Liptacks, who had a full-sized mat in their basement. I ate, breathed, and dreamed wrestling. I became the process itself. But what helped me most was wrestling a 24 year-old former state champion turned Sunnyside drug dealer who stood watch over the parking lot at the Sagittarius Lounge.

His mother called him Mikey, but everyone else referred to him as Cheetah. Everyone, young and old, liked Cheetah; even the cops respected him. He had gone to Carson-Newman University on a scholarship but didn’t make it there a full semester. When asked why he came home, Cheetah softly said, “Thangs came up.” He later told me that “he didn’t have his mind right.” When kids asked him why he sold weed, Cheetah always responded with his signature line sampled from Bob Dylan, “you gots to serve somebody.” Coach Sloan liked Cheetah and felt sorry for him, it seemed. Coach would encourage us to spend as much time with Cheetah as possible. “He’s full of it,” Coach would say with a wink. Cheetah would softly respond, “full of love and happiness.” Cheetah had a key to the practice room, so I would meet him there five nights a week during the summer. And no one had to ask why his name was Cheetah. His motion was fast, smooth, fluid. He spent hours shadowing himself in the

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mirror. He would tell us kids, “you got to picture yourself hitting the move,” and the mirror kept that image right in sight. The most important thing he taught me, and he taught me plenty, was moving “on the one,” as he liked to say. That is, his movement, his timing and rhythm, was choreographed to Roger and Zapp’s “More Bounce to the Ounce.” If he didn’t have something to play it on, he had one of us sound out the bass line. That bass-line became the internal clock by which we executed not moves (“ain’t nobody busting moves, man!”) but “flow.” Cheetah served as our standard, and if we measured ourselves against the best, we’d get a damn good idea where we stood not simply as wrestlers but as people. And I stood pretty good as the summer closed. While he could always beat me at any time, my now perfected granby roll surprised him often.

The fourth match of my junior year yielded a 2-2 tie with the state champion, James Black. I then wrestled a hulk of a 132 lb. man-child named Boyd, who, once he got his hands on me, gave me little room for error. I lost every takedown, but he came at me so aggressively that I hit three granby rolls on him throughout the match, beating him by 7 points, leaving him stunned. “How a little motherfucker like you can upset somebody like me?” I now was all business. I kept getting better and better throughout the season, more polished, refined, and efficient in movement. I finally was fluid. I won the Christmas tournament, the conference championship, the regional championship, and was seeded first at the state tournament. And, of course, I met Mr. Hulk himself again in the state final at 134 lbs.

Like our first encounter, Boyd out-muscled me. He was quicker on the takedown and had learned to stay behind me or to turn me loose when I got wiggly so that he could then take me down again. Taking me down was his strategy. I couldn’t hold him down long enough to ride him out when he was in the defensive position, so I turned him loose only for him to take me down again. With 30 seconds left in the match, he had control and a 5-point lead. Because he was stronger and with such a lead, he figured he could hold me down for the last 30 seconds, keeping me pushed to my stomach and controlling my hands. But, a slight shift in his body weight allowed me to get to my base and then hit a series of six sit-outs, creating separation and then a granby for a 5-point move. Regulation ended in a tie. Both of us were gassed and now faced another 3 one-minute round in overtime. He took me down and rode out the first minute. He chose the defensive position, escaped, and then took me down, letting me back up so that he could attempt another take down. He failed on the last attempt as the second period expired. But then he had a 5-1 lead going into the third period with one minute left. He immediately let me escape at 5-2 and was warned for stalling. He then attacked with a high-crotch, moved around behind me in the standing position, hands locked around my waist, on the way to bringing me to the mat and winning the match. But there was a wrinkle: I had expanded my ability to granby out of a standing defensive position, polished against the smoothest wrestler I knew, Cheetah. With 12 seconds left, I arched my back and head into his face, smashing his nose with

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the back of my head, changing levels just enough to create space between us, then hit a standing roll, scooping his leg with one arm and hanging tight to his wrist around my waist. Suddenly, he was on his back, flailing around like a wounded animal with 6 seconds left. I couldn't have held him for seven, but six was enough for a 5-point move. I just won the freaking state championship.

The medal was mine only in trust. Coach Sloan, Cheetah, Norris, James Black, Drummond, Lollis, Sunnyside, and the Mill-Hill set the standard and challenged all to meet it. I was Coach Sloan's first state champion, certainly not his last. He had refereed high school wrestling for 15 years but had never coached a team before ours. The shared victory, then, served as testament to belief in some object: a desired good that couldn't be guaranteed in advance. It underscored the central place of interest so absorbed in an object that, as Dewey puts it, the person has both lost himself in it and found himself in it. It was a culmination of a spirit, a faith that a blue-collar work ethic mixed with a little Sunnyside funk was sufficient enough to carry a self against risk and the precarious. It was a monument, however fleeting, to the disciplining power of habit to secure a deeply desired good.

This story had a happy ending but not for the reasons you'd expect. I didn't repeat as state champion my senior year, nor did I wrestle in college. I met John Rosemond in the finals of the Christmas tournament. Long, lanky point of leverage and a quick study, he was ready for me. I busted my move, but as I rolled through my shoulders, he stepped over my legs and trapped me on my back, pinning me almost instantly. I faced him again in the conference finals, and we wrestled evenly for most of the match. Late in the final period, I succeeded at putting him out of balance and held that granby for as long as I could, but he finally broke my hold with 9 seconds left on the clock, reversed me, and won by 2 points. I simply didn't have it in me anymore, and he stayed hungry, as they say. Robert Pirsig comes to mind here: "Any effort that has self-glorification as its final endpoint is bound to end in disaster."<sup>2</sup> I had this wild idea that simply because I was a returning state champion, it was inevitable that I would always be the state champion. But, more importantly, my athleticism had taken me in another direction.

When Coach Sloan told me that being an athlete was a way of life, who a person is in everything he does, I took him literally. The second I walked off from that conversation I moved with purpose and determination—all business. I began to work hard in school, plodding along, trying to squeeze out meaning instead of merely enduring the school day. While I still struggled at chemistry and physics, I began to do well in English. I made plenty of time for myself to read slowly what was assigned, methodically taking notes, employing the dictionary like a mason with his trowel. At one point, Coach Sloan said to me that wrestling could take me to college, but I needed to be in courses that

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974).

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would prepare me for that path. Upon his recommendation, the AP English teacher let me into his class, though I really had little business being in there. Coach had told him that “Hewitt might not be the best student in that class, but nobody will out work him.” My life changed forever.

I had never been a serious student; didn’t know what it meant to be an intellectual. All I had was a strong trust in my qualitative sense and a work ethic, both of which, it turned out, served me well. My experience was an embodiment of Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” or his *Red Badge of Courage*. I understood Macbeth, Lear, and Hamlet in terms of death and tragedy in my own life. And when we turned to southern literature, well, Victor Mill and Sunnyside were my points of comparison for class and race. Alice Walker’s “Strong Horse Tea,” Ernest Gaines’ “The Sky is Gray,” Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, and Eudora Welty’s *A Curtain of Green* captured and articulated my life experience up to that point. Then, a great epiphany. The point had been there all along. My daddy had tried to impress this point many times: classism and racism are sister oppressions. They are not one and the same but similar. You can let them consume you “behind your back,” so to speak, or you can attack them head on. What I had learned from my black peers and from my experience in that English course was that excellence is about process, about taking the little bit of nothing one has and turning it into something, despite obstacles. Hell, the entire African American experience stands as a testament to this. “Making something out of nothing,” though, comes with no instructions; it’s trial and error that forces one, due to the consequences that return back, to trust and fine-tune one’s qualitative sense, to know by feel, by rhythm of the quales at work on and through a body. This is not to say that this qualitative sense was a sole possession of black people or that all black people exhibited this sense. This is just my particular experience of some who did. Plenty of white people on my side of the tracks lived by this sense as well. Its root source lies in the blues of the downtrodden, but its funk grows out of the invincible determination not only to survive but to prevail. I’m referring here to a class mentality that registers the call of tribulation with a response of, “I’m here motherfucker, you best be ready.” Tony Bolden has pointed out that this funk “bespeaks a kinetic epistemology” and flows like an electrical charge across an electromagnetic field.<sup>3</sup> The kinship I felt toward the people of Sunnyside had less to do with race directly than it did with a common attitude toward transitory, unstable, and volatile forces that dominated our shared experience of place.

I can’t say that I would have never come to this understanding at some point in my life without having met Coach Sloan and without having wrestled. But Coach Sloan and the sport of wrestling have enriched my life with meaning

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Bolden, “Theorizing The Funk: An Introduction,” in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15.

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too precious to quantify. Both lend great poignancy to a Dewey quotation that I would cherish 35 years later:

It is of grace not of ourselves that we lead civilized lives. There is sound sense in the old pagan notion that gratitude is the root of all virtue. Loyalty to whatever in the established environment makes a life of excellence possible is the beginning of all progress. The best we can accomplish for prosperity is to transmit unimpaired and with some increment of meaning the environment that makes it possible to maintain the habits of decent and refined life. Our individual habits are links in forming the endless chain of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 21.

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