

# Wrestling offers many opportunities for kids

Sport can help young athletes build self-confidence and also have a huge impact on their future success in life

**By Mike Clayton, National Coaches Education Manager**

It's a great honor to write for *USA Wrestler* and have the opportunity to focus this column on wrestling at the younger age levels. My earliest memories of wrestling are of fun times with new and old friends, learning and developing balance, strength and agility and admiring the older wrestlers around me as I grew up.

Our sport has amazing role models, and the people I've always surrounded myself with have helped to mold me into the man I am today.

I've loved the sport of wrestling since my brother, Kenny, started wrestling the first year it was offered at BGM High School in Brooklyn, Iowa in 1975-76. At Kenny's matches, I was the four year old "wrestling announcer" along with one of our neighbor's daughters (the sister of another wrestler on the team).

We would watch the team lineups as all of the introductions were done with team members in their wrestling robes and tights.

We would sit in the bleachers with our feet dangling underneath our makeshift announcer's booth. We would call all the takedowns, reversals and back points but the big thrill was always when one of our guys would get a pin! The energy was electric and I never stood a chance... wrestling was going to be my life.

My sister was the manager for our high school's wrestling team in those years, so the sport was truly a family affair.

"Being a manager was what I could do to be a part of wrestling," said LeeAnn Clayton. "I washed mats, washed the stinky wrestling clothes and kept stats and I loved it! I knew that the team and coaches needed those jobs done and that they appreciated having those things done right."

LeeAnn and Kenny helped me learn some techniques but LeeAnn also dressed me up to look like a wrestler in an old bath robe, long-john underwear as tights and one time even using my mom's bra as a headgear!

We produced some big time wrestling events right in our living room.

"We wanted to look the part and dressing up was a creative way for us to be a part of the sport," said LeeAnn. "We grew up on a farm, we used the resources we had to simulate what we

saw our wrestling heroes doing and we were encouraged to work hard and have fun in all that we did."

Wrestling really started coming back in our area when the community got around the program.

Parents were in the mix, analyzing matches, videotaping and supporting the dreams of our wrestlers.

Several coaches volunteered to help develop the athletes, and fundraising efforts started to yield real results. Once you start to succeed, most communities really support you and get behind your efforts.

Extracurricular activities are a huge part of small town living in America and they help communities and families participate, come together and get excited about something in a very positive way.

"Wrestling has always been such a big part of our family. Having that support helps get you to events, builds your self-confidence and makes a huge impact on future success," said LeeAnn.

Competitions for me started on my fifth birthday.

The age group was 6-8 years old, but I was so excited to participate that when the lady at registration asked my mom if I was six, my mom (who would never lie about it) simply said, "Today is his birthday."

True to her word, it was my fifth birthday!

I have to say I never felt an urge to quit the sport or really even had a desire to take much time away from being on the mats.

I made it to the finals of that first tournament and was getting soundly beaten.

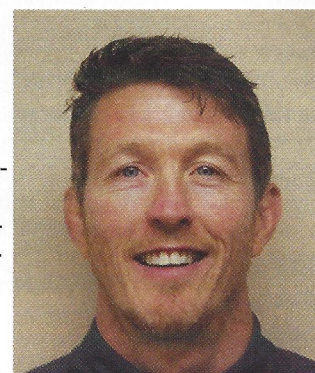
The referee then was asking me if I wanted to continue the match.

If I tried to speak I'd start crying so I just nodded my head up and down and kept trying.

Many obstacles and distractions can jump in the way of our wrestling dreams but those challenges are always a gift that, if taken the right way, can help us develop a strong personal character.

This series of articles will be dedicated to the ingredients that have helped me continue to grow the love I have for our sport as a wrestler, coach and fan.

I will also include some valuable training tools along our journey. I hope you look forward to each little time vault of my past wrestling experiences and I look forward to sharing my experiences with you.



Clayton