

The Toughest Kid on the Block

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In the fall of 1969, Jim Brandt, the gym teacher at Meadowbrook Grade School in Rapid City, South Dakota announced that in six weeks all students were going to take the President's Physical Fitness Test. He posted the school records for each event. He told all of the 5th graders to try and pick out one record and see if any of us could beat it.

I saw that the school record for chin-ups was 18. I tried to see how many I could do. I did 12! When I went home that day, I told my dad about it. He said, "Why don't you try doing 12 every day for a week, and then the next week, do 13 every day and then the next week do 14 every day until you get up to 18." I listened to him, and by the time of the fitness test, I could do 18 chin-ups. I tied the school record.

I also started wrestling that year for the first time. I became the school champion at the lightest weight class of 65 pounds. I knew only three moves, the double leg, half nelson, and the stand up. Jim Brandt and my dad, Larry Lewis took a bunch of us kids to the AAU Age-Group kid's regionals to qualify for the state tournament. In my first official tournament, I went 5-0 and won the regional. From there it was on to the state tournament.

As I warmed up with the other wrestlers before the tournament started, I was in awe of competing against the best kids in the state. Some of them had been wrestling for three or four years. They had medals on their jackets, too. I went and told my dad that some of these kids looked tough with their medals. With all their experience, I didn't think I could win. My dad said "They might look tough, but I'll bet none of them can do 18 chin-ups like you can."

He also told me not to think of them as the best kids in the state. He said what if they were from Rapid City, and they went to Meadowbrook Grade School, and what if they lived right next door to us? If you couldn't beat them, then you wouldn't be Meadowbrook school champion, and you wouldn't be the toughest kid on your own block. He said, "you are the toughest kid on the block aren't you?" I smiled, and said, "I sure am!"

Before my first match, I asked my opponent, a kid named Dan Blye, if this was his first state tournament. He said that last year he got second place. Feeling a little more nervous, I asked him how many chin-ups he could do. When he said 16, I felt better.

Knowing I was stronger than he was convinced me that I could overcome his experience, and beat him. I can vividly remember thinking that if he lived in Rapid City, if he went to my grade school, and if he lived next door to me, I could beat him. I knew I was the toughest kid on the block.

When the referee blew the whistle, I immediately shot in on a double-leg and would not let go. The matches then were two 2-minute periods, both starting on the feet. I ended up winning the match 4-1, getting both takedowns, and losing a point for choking. I had five more matches that day, and I won them all by scores of 4-1, or 4-2, or 4-3. In every match I got points against me for locking hands or choking. I got every takedown and I would not let go once I got on top.

Before every match, I asked my opponent how many chin-ups he could do. Not one could do 18, like I could do. I also remembered to think about every match, not as if I was going up against the best kids in the state, but I brought them back in my mind to Rapid City. To Meadowbrook grade school, and all the way right next door. To my block. At the end of the day, not only was I the South Dakota State champion at 60 pounds, but I was still the toughest kid on the block.

The next year, I went on to repeat as state champion at 65 pounds. From there, it was on to my first national tournament in Miles City, Montana. While I was warming up I saw a mean-looking kid with a crew cut about my size. I went up and said hello and asked him what weight class he was wrestling. He said he was at 65 pounds and he was going to easily win the tournament. He said he was a two-time state champion from Wyoming and had never lost a match.

I told him I was a two-time state champion from South Dakota, and I had never lost either. He said he was going to easily beat me, and I had never had any kid tell me that before. I figured he must really be tough to go around telling other kids he was going to whip them. (This was the days before Muhammed Ali.)

I went over to the brackets to see who I had to wrestle, and wouldn't you know it, I had the two-time state champion from Wyoming. Truth be told, I was scared. Then I asked the kid how many chin-ups he could do? When he said he could do 18, I smiled.

By now, I had set the Meadowbrook school record with 20 chin-ups. I knew I was stronger than the kid from Wyoming was. I remembered that if he were from South Dakota, if I couldn't beat him, I wouldn't be a two-time state champion. What if he was from Rapid City, and went to Meadowbrook grade school? What if he lived on the same block as me?

If I couldn't beat him, I wouldn't be the toughest kid on the block. Well, I got fired up and went out and whipped the kid from Wyoming 16-0, on the way to winning the tournament. Not only was I now a national champion, but I was still the toughest kid on the block.

It was this mindset that I continued to have great success, winning national titles at every age-group and winning the NCAA's as a sophomore and making the world team as a true freshman. That took me to January 1980.

That was my junior year in college. In the middle of the college season, I went to Russia to wrestle in the toughest tournament in the world, the Tbilisi Tournament. This meet is considered tougher than the world championships or the Olympics, because so many Russians entered. The Russians at the time as they are now, were considered the best freestyle wrestlers in the world.

At the time, I was 20 years old, and wrestled at 136.5 pounds. Gene Mills and myself were the only two collegiate wrestlers to make this trip. At the time, I was a junior in college and thought I was the best wrestler in college at any weight.

I was the only collegiate wrestler at that time who had made both the world team and had won a NCAA title. While Mills was also a NCAA champion, he had not yet made a world team. I considered myself to be a better wrestler than Gene Mills.

What I saw from Gene Mills on this trip totally astounded me. "Mean Gene the Pinning Machine" as he became known, went on a tear. Wrestling at 114.5 pounds, Mills went 8-0 in the Tbilisi tournament, with 7 pins. In the finals, he was ahead 18-0 when they cautioned the Russian out of the match for stalling. I went 0-3 against the Russians and 5-0 against other foreigners on this trip.

Mills was pinning Russians right and left. How was he doing it, I asked myself? He was getting really psyched up before each match, saying I'm going to pin this Russian, I'm going to tear him up, nobody can go the distance with me.

I remember thinking, these are the Russians he is talking about, the best wrestlers in the world. How can he think he can pin them and beat them so easily? I thought, I am better than Gene, why is he pinning these Russians, and I am losing to them.

And then it hit me.

Mills was pinning these Russians and I wasn't for the simple reason that he believed he would pin them. I was thinking, these are the best wrestlers in the world, how can I beat them? After the tournament, I remember thinking that if Gene Mills can pin these Russians, then so can I.

A few months later, the United States and the Soviet Union had a dual meet in my hometown, Rapid City, South Dakota. I was picked to wrestle for the United States team against the best Russian wrestler at 136.5 pounds, Victor Alexeev, a two-time world champion.

At the time, my record against the Russians was 0-5. Back in my hometown, my dad and all my friends all asked how I thought I could do against the Russian. I told them all I was going to pin him. They all said Randy, "how can you say you are going to pin the Russian? He is the best in the world, and you have never beaten a Russian."

I told them, "Last night I looked through my old high school scrapbooks, and I counted all the matches I wrestled here in Rapid City in high school. I was 50-0 with 48 pins, and I won the other 2 matches by scores of 12-0 and 23-2. That's what I do in Rapid City is pin people."

And then I looked at my dad and told him, "Dad, tomorrow night, I am not going to be wrestling the best wrestler in the world. I'm going to be wrestling another kid who may have grown up in Rapid City, and may have gone to Meadowbrook grade school, and may have lived right next door to me, and tomorrow night we are going to see who really is the toughest kid on the block."

Over 7,000 fans showed up the next night to watch the dual meet between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Russians won the first 3 matches before I stepped on the mat against Victor Alexeev. They had the momentum going their way.

Two minutes later, when I threw Alexeev on his back, I heard the loudest roar I had ever heard, only to be eclipsed 20 seconds later when the referee called the fall. With victories by Lee Kemp, Chris Campbell, Ben Peterson, and Larry Bielenberg (over 2-time Olympic champion Ivan Yarygin), the United States scored our first-ever dual meet victory over the Soviet Union.

My father, Larry Lewis organized the event, and former USA Wrestling Executive Director and now head of the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC), Jim Scherer has said it is still the most successful USA-Russia dual meet he had ever seen.

After the meet, I hugged my dad and told him I was still THE TOUGHEST KID ON THE BLOCK.