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During my early years of high school, I paid little attention to my studies and didn't care much about school. I had fallen into a routine of avoiding classes and behaving like a delinquent, thinking it was acceptable at the time. I remember most days were filled with skipping classes, smoking weed, and dozing off when I did manage to attend. My lack of motivation and drive was constantly reminded of by my teachers.

I was grappling with social isolation, pressure from school, and challenges in my personal life. During this time, I was consumed by confusion as I questioned the purpose of it all and how to navigate life. Growing up in the Projects and attending public schools contributed to my mindset. I lacked the support and guidance of many people, and my single mother was often unable to help me align my values. I was unfortunate and miserable.

On a routine lackluster lunch in the school cafeteria, I found myself sitting alone as usual, but this time someone joined me. His name was Aldo, and we started talking about comic books, video games, anime, and other topics that teenagers talk about. Aldo had these big round glasses, heavy duty braces, and a crisp bowl cut, which led me to initially believe he was a typical nerd who invested far too much time into school. However, I soon realized that I envied him and my assumptions were unfounded. Aldo was a good student, taking honors classes, and he genuinely encouraged others. We became good friends and spent a lot of time together, and I grew to appreciate the person he was.

I eventually discovered that Aldo was involved in school sports, most importantly the wrestling team. Although he rarely spoke about his wins in wrestling meets and tournaments, I eventually asked him what the team had to offer. To my surprise, Aldo wasn't just a superficially stereotypical nerd; he was a dominant force on the wrestling mat. Aldo suggested that I join the wrestling team as he was aware of my struggles in school, believing it could benefit me as it did for him. I had low expectations but a gut feeling told me it was worth a try.

On my first day of wrestling practice, I had no clue about the workings of the sport. Collegiate wrestling was entirely foreign to me, but Coach Perez gave me a warm welcome and introduced himself. He shared his background, his black belt in Judo, his college wrestling experience, and his time as a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Coach Perez preferred to be called Coach, and he showed us around the Wrestling Room, a converted dance room equipped with mats for safety. He pointed out the championships adorning the walls, sharing brief histories of each student and their stories. I was surprised to learn that many of these students came from difficult backgrounds, as one wrestler was homeless and earned a scholarship after winning several championships. It showed me that these other kids didn’t let their struggles prevent them from achieving success.

From the start, I was faced by the difficulty of the sport. Seasoned wrestlers honed their skills and strength like machines, while I struggled just to stand up after simple techniques. Gradually, I learned the fundamentals of wrestling—proper takedowns and takedown defenses, leveraging weight and angles to throw opponents, and the importance of cardiovascular and muscular endurance. To be on the team, I had to pass all my classes, which provided me with a pathway to success.

Over the course of two years on the wrestling team, I developed muscles I didn't know existed and learned the purpose and benefits of each of them. Initially, I was weak and couldn't even walk properly for days after my first practice. However, with consistent training and occasional weightlifting, I overcame all of those weaknesses.

I can relate to “My American Journey, By Colin Powell” because Colin Powell shared a similar experience as I did when I first saw myself in a wrestling singlet. “As soon as I got home, I put the uniform on and looked in the mirror. I liked what I saw. At this point, not a single Kelly Street friend of mine was going to college. I was seventeen. I felt cut off and lonely. The uniform gave me a sense of belonging, and something I had never experienced all the while I was growing up; I felt distinctive.” Colin Powell shared his vulnerability when feeling cut off and lonely, but his new uniform gave him a sense of purpose and connection towards something he genuinely believed in. Despite his lack of direction in school, he had the ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) save him from becoming lost in life and gave him a new form of direction. I relate to Colin Powell as I had lacked direction in school and Wrestling helped me get through tough times and saved me from becoming lost in life.

Through wrestling, I developed the mental focus and physicality required to compete. I learned to stay calm under stress and remain level-headed despite the rush of adrenaline. Every time I stepped onto the wrestling mat for a match, I was filled with fear and anxiety. I was afraid of losing and being embarrassed. But with each step, I grew more focused and fearless. By the time I entered the ring, I became a force of nature, fearing nothing. I realized that it was my own expectations that held me back, and once I set the intention to win, I became powerful.

In wrestling, I experienced both victories and losses. Despite encountering bad attitudes and poor sportsmanship, I learned that there is no shame in losing. I vividly remember my first loss in a tournament against a national champion, where I was pinned in under 30 seconds. The wave of shame and embarrassment that washed over me was overwhelming. However, my coach approached me after the match and asked, "What happened?"

In shock and devastation, I could only respond, "I don't know." I couldn't believe what had just transpired, and I couldn't provide an explanation.

My coach then bluntly said, "You got fucked up. And that's okay. He was the better wrestler today. But what happened as soon as he had you in a headlock?"

Confused, I answered, "He pinned me."

Coach Perez sat me down and delivered an important lesson. He pointed out that I had given up as soon as I found myself in a challenging position. He reminded me that I could have tried to escape the hold, but instead, I went limp. He made it clear that he didn't want to see that kind of attitude from me anymore.

Coach Perez's words resonated with me, as they mirrored my previous approach to school. I used to believe that education was a lost cause and repeatedly gave up on it. Through wrestling, I learned discipline and perseverance. I discovered that there is always hope in every situation, as long as I put in the effort. Giving up wouldn't change anything. I started telling myself that my true nature wasn't one of mediocrity, failure, frustration, or defeat, but one of achievement, strength, and nobility. I fought against self-doubt, stood on my feet, and faced life's challenges instead of accepting failure and falling on my back.

Upon reflection, I realized that wrestling taught me valuable lessons and values that I continue to appreciate and practice to this day. Overcoming the struggles in wrestling allowed me to believe that I could tackle the challenges in school as well. I understood that to do better, I had to make the choice to put in an earnest effort. I held a clear image of myself and my purpose. I learned not to worry about my individual potential because it is only an expression of possibility, something that can only be realized in hindsight.

In conclusion, my journey as a wrestler in high school was transformative, shaping my perspective on education, instilling discipline and perseverance within me, and teaching me the value of giving my best effort in all endeavors. Wrestling became my saving grace, providing me with a sense of purpose and belonging, while helping me develop mental focus and physical strength to tackle challenges with confidence and resilience. Through victories and losses, I learned that setbacks are not failures but opportunities for growth, and that the true measure of success lies in personal growth and character development. Guided by Coach Perez, I discovered the power of determination and the ability to surpass my own limitations. Today, I carry the lessons learned from wrestling, reminding myself that with effort and a resilient mindset, I can achieve great things and always improve.