

# Deaf Paul Ruff listens intently to his inner coach

**A**s an athlete, you are trained to listen to your coach, both in practice and during a match. What if the only coach you can hear is your own echo inside your headgear? For Nebraska's Alliance High School tenth grader Paul Ruff, whose dad/coach Scott was a Division II national champion, that guiding voice trusts his intuition and is reinforced by a terrific work ethic and the heart of a lion.

Born deaf, Paul communicates through a cochlear implant that makes his environment accessible. When wrestling, the transmitter is not worn, leaving Paul to follow his natural instincts as well as lessons absorbed from his dad and others. But even with the transmitter, Paul must work that much harder; for him, learning is not incidental or informal, which is how the majority of us grow and learn.

For a hearing individual, this indirect education comes via social cues and through internalizing the world around them. For Paul, he best learns externally through practice and repetition, via hand signals from his dad during breaks in a match, and from reviewing his mistakes by video following a match.

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**— Scott Ruff**

Perhaps it's because Paul has viewed his hearing deficit as a calling to bring out his best instead of as a limitation, which might offer an excuse.

“Paul is a lot more dedicated at his age than I ever was,” said his father, Scott. “All his life, he has had a singular work ethic, using that discipline to learn how to learn.” Paul believes that he “leads by example” and demonstrates that “hard work pays off.” He doesn't want others to think that, ‘I am only good because my dad was good.’ It's because I work harder.

“Paul definitely sets the bar for his teammates and raises the level that we expect from the whole team. Since age 12, he has never missed an open mat. Disciplined, he gets up at 5 a.m. to lift weights at the gym, returns for homeschool, and then attends open mats or practice. His only frustration is that at times his teammates are not as consistently focused as he is.”

“Homeschool helps me learn better. I can rewind and learn again if needed,” Paul said.

“In a regular classroom, it is difficult to distinguish from where noises come,” added Scott. “We had to hire a lawyer to declare a hardship case in order to allow Paul to compete for the local high school.”

Despite these challenges, Paul began his freshman season at 106 pounds by going undefeated well into January; and even while fighting off a lingering virus, he still qualified for state.

To further improve himself, Paul and Scott look forward to the exposure and cross-state competition he gets at RMN Events. Paul enjoys “the big competition, the unique venue, and the tough competitors.” Scott appreci-

By **Bill X Barron**

ates “the overall presentation, RMN's reputation and the credibility which comes through attracting good wrestlers from all over. We come there to combat the small-town mentality. Just by being there, the increased exposure makes our kids rise to a new level.”

At the recent RMN Monster Match, 16-year old Paul made the 120-pound finals in the tough 18-&-Under Division.

In addition to the inherent hurdles of being deaf in a hearing world, at times Paul's opponents take advantage of his inability to hear the official or his whistle, especially

near the edge of the mat. Paul has adapted by not stopping wrestling until touched by the referee, which sometimes confuses his opponent who goes by the whistle. For Paul, wrestling — and life — is a “constant battle.”

“My biggest challenge is that I am all by myself out there,” Paul said. “I cannot hear the coaches when I am in trouble. Instead, I have to figure it out myself. During a match, I keep an eye on the official. Afterward, I watch video, so I can determine how I can get better.”

Coach Scott notes that “Paul is always watching, a vigilant observer who studies other styles to figure them out. If you did not know he was deaf, you would have no idea, because he is so good at adapting his wrestling.”

Off the mat, Paul's hobby is carving rocks. On the mat, he is carving a niche all his own. ■



**Paul Ruff (left) ignores the fact he cannot hear and qualified for the Nebraska state wrestling tournament in his first varsity season at Alliance High School,**

(Jennifer Johnson photo)