

No such thing as a handicap when these two wrestlers came together

By Bill X Barron

Step inside the circle of life. Immediately, it demands: What are you willing to sacrifice to the quest? What will you give back when you leave the arena? Who will be next to step inside your shoes?

Wrestling mirrors how one lives life. Each wrestler is measured by his or her willingness to take risks, the courage to confront challenge, and the discipline to respond with determination regardless of the score or the odds.

Born without shinbones from a condition called tibial hemimelia, Hasaan Hawthorne's legs were amputated above his knees at three months old. Hasaan wrapped up an undefeated senior season at Pelham High School with the 2016 Alabama state championship at 145 pounds and was named Class 6A Outstanding Wrestler and is now on a wrestling scholarship at Hastings College in Nebraska.

Meanwhile, Sammie Cyrus of Dubois, Wyo., came down with meningitis at 10.5 months, resulting in the amputation of his right foot at age 3 and his left foot at age 8. Now in his second year of wrestling, Sammie is an RMN Wild West rookie champion, after "building upon moves and improving body position and strength."

While Cyrus and Hawthorne are of different ages and from opposite sides of the country, the wrestling family brought them together in 2019 as training partners who share a common desire to transform obstacle into opportunity.

Deep South Alabama seems far away from northern Wyoming's Fremont County, less than a hundred miles south of Yellowstone with a population of a thousand. But Dubois Rams coach David Trembly understood that Sam-

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—Hasaan Hawthorne

mie needed to learn from someone who had experienced life from a similar perspective.

"He was going to have to develop his own style," said Trembly.

The coach read an article about Hasaan and sent an e-mail to his North Idaho College coach, Brandon Richardson, thinking they might give me a few hints. Well, they both came to Wyoming and spent almost eight hours with Sammie, not only working with him on his wrestling skills, but also talking with him about taking on challeng-

es. At that time a junior at North Idaho, Hasaan was ranked No. 5 nationally, before an injury sidelined him prior to regionals.

Responding to his challenges with creativity, Sammie has taken advantage of a lower center of gravity and a powerful upper body to seize a double-leg tangle, execute an ankle pick, perform a sit-out smash or wrap up an unbreakable near-side cradle. Sammie has turned disability into a unique ability to succeed in his own way.

As Sammie repeats to himself: "Stay in the mindset."

Similarly, Hasaan has had to figure out what technique works best, so he could always be in the best position to score.

"I had to protect myself by staying one step ahead of my opponent," Hasaan said. "I also quickly learned to wrestle mistake free. I couldn't bridge off my back without legs. So, I adapted, learning to control wrists and ankles."

Hasaan's mantra became: "Make it yours, then kill it!"

As Hasaan matured, "wrestling taught me how to become a man by chasing a dream I believe in and to value working hard," he said. "Wrestlers don't need extra equipment or even eyes or legs. I grew up with the confidence to be me ... and the perseverance to get up on my own. Wrestling allowed me to be me."

In Sammie's life, "wrestling built me to be mentally strong, how to rely on myself, not the team. It developed my character," he said. "Whenever I start to feel sorry for myself, I remove that feeling as fast as I can. I have learned I cannot seal myself off if I lose; I have to get out of that state of mind and take on the next opponent."

Sammie's journey began early on "when I learned I could get around the house faster by walking like a gorilla on my knuckles without the aid of prostheses. Now I am stronger than most others on my wrestling team. In a way, I accidentally prepared myself to become a wrestler."



Hasaan Hawthorne (left), a native of Alabama who later competed at North Idaho College and currently with Hastings College, had his legs amputated at age 3 months. Sammie Cyrus of Wyoming lost his feet at ages 3 and 8 after dealing with meningitis as a baby.

Hasaan acknowledges he has seen his way through tough times by developing "a positive outlook and learning how to get through them. I can relate to those who have gone through the exact same thing. I want those I help to know that they have someone who knows the journey, even when it's not always happy."

"I want to give back to all kids!" exclaims Hasaan, a communications major with a goal to own his own business and to become a motivational speaker.

"Kids should experience joy before life hits them and

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Theater, as did his brother Joe, undefeated during his career at the Naval Academy.

And of course, there are the 1980 Olympics, which were held in Moscow but boycotted by President Jimmy Carter. The pain from that experience haunts many great American wrestlers yet today.

Lee Kemp comes quickly to mind. Already a two-time world champion at the time, he was a huge favorite to win a gold medal at 163 pounds. All up and down the line-ups, both freestyle and Greco-Roman, there were potential medal winners that were kept home: men like Russ Hellickson, Chris Campbell and Chuck Yagla in freestyle and Brad Rheingans, Dan Chandler and Mark Johnson in Greco-Roman. I have thought

of their lost opportunities many times over the last 40 years.

Life is full of moments of immense satisfaction, but also moments of profound disappointment. That is the nature of things.

So as thoughts of the 2020 NCAA Wrestling Championships fade, there will also be an enduring sense of loss for the wrestlers and coaches who missed out on their opportunities to place their names into the record books. And fans will have to deal with the losses, as well.

Sometimes, however, such profound sadness can bring a spark of togetherness. I found that in an article written by Bill Horlacher on the Penn State website, when he interviewed Jeff Byers, the radio

voice of the Nittany Lions wrestling program.

Byers was WIN's Journalist of Year in 1999 and 2012 and has been covering Penn State wrestling for 31 years. In the Horlacher column, Byers offered the following:

"Well, I know Penn State fans may joke by saying, 'At least we don't want to see Iowa win a national title.' But truthfully, my heart does break for those kids. It's been a long road for them to get back to where they're at. And (now) they don't have the opportunity to go out and close this thing the way they thought they could."

Penn State and Iowa are arch-rivals on the mat, but it's good to know that

respect for one's opponent can still run deep through both programs — and in the hearts of wrestling fans everywhere, regardless of whom they cheer for when the battle begins.

In the end, we all share the huge disappointment when such major events are canceled due to forces beyond our control but we can still have feelings of empathy for all who are affected, regardless of whom we cheer for when the action starts.

(Mike Chapman is the founder of WIN Magazine, the Dan Hodge Trophy, and the National Hall of Fame Dan Gable Museum, and is author of 30 books. He was named to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2007.) ■

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dozens of times in slow motion hitting his throw-the-arm-over-the-back duck-under high crotch. It was "slick," and I wanted to learn the technique.

Today, I learn almost daily something new from practically unlimited resources. Now is a great time to really sit down and watch wrestling to learn and become a better wrestler. It could be set-ups to shots or a series on top that will beat your opponent to submission.

Get strong and fit. You really have

no excuses not to work out. None. You do not need a gym or weights. There are thousands of work-outs you can do at home without equipment. You can get stronger, completing bodyweight workouts.

Obviously, if you have weights, lift them. If you do not, look on the Internet and get busy. Each day I am seeing free workouts being posted from countless fitness trainers and coaches.

The strength coach for Ohio State

wrestling — @coachmyers_gutcheck — posts wrestling-related workouts regularly. Hit me up on Instagram @CoachKless if you need guidance. I always love talking about work-outs.

What is happening now in our country is unprecedented. There is much speculation on the length of time the coronavirus is going to be around. You have a choice.

You can look at this as a blessing and opportunity to get better, or you can make

excuses and complain that this has messed up your life. Being a wrestler, you know first hand the definition of setbacks and heartache. You also understand that with work and perseverance, you can turn anything around. It is a choice and a change of perspective.

(John Klessinger is a teacher and wrestling coach at South River High School in Maryland. You can follow him on Instagram @coachkless and like his Facebook page "Coach Kless".) ■

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it's all stripped away," Hasaan asserts. "I can mentor them, help them realize their deep-down potential. They should live life to the fullest, fulfill their purpose, achieve their dreams as I did."

Sammie relates: "I never thought I would earn a first-place trophy. My first RMN tournament was the Wild West in Gillette, where I was blown away by the level of competition and all the ceremony. But I put in a lot of work, including summer camp and what I learned through training with Hasaan and it paid off. A year later, I was a champion wearing a gold medal around my neck!"

Winning a high school state title was Hasaan's "goal from an early age. I kept up the struggle despite not winning many matches the first few years and later after I went through several surgeries. Literally, it was constant work, but I kept going."

After finishing third in state his junior year, Hasaan achieved that pinnacle atop the championship podium in his final year of high school.

Before winning state in wrestling, Hasaan made the all-star team in baseball and played football. After his state title came an ESPN special feature, local news



Hasaan Hawthorne (left) and Sammie Cyprus met and later trained together when Hawthorne was wrestling for North Idaho College.

interviews, and Hasaan's YouTube video.

"It's been a crazy journey, but it has led to some cool opportunities," Hasaan said remembering the past.

"I remember Hasaan telling Sammie several times: 'Make them come to your level, then climb on,'" Trembly related.

"Hasaan and Coach Richardson gave Sam hope, not just for the mat but for life. Two years ago, kids at meets would look at him and stare.

"Now, because of Sammie's heart and love of the sport, kids crowd around to say 'hi' and to cheer him on."

**"Wrestling built me to be mentally strong, how to rely on myself, not the team."
— Sammie Cyprus, 12-year-old Wyoming wrestler**

"The guy is a double amputee; he shows up every single day and his body hurts every single day," Hastings College coach Tyson Springer said of Hasaan. "It just shows other kids you can't have excuses. You've got to put your head down and go. He is one of those younger kids that you want to see and look up to."

Early in his life, a rare form of meningitis turned Sammie's skin black and put him in a coma for 10 days.

"At age 3, we made the choice for him, a Syme amputation through the ankle joints," Sammie's mother Kelly said.

"When he was 8, and in so much pain, the other foot was Sammie's choice — incredible for someone so young. Now I am so exuberant that he calls himself a champion!"

In Kelly's view, "wrestling has given Sammie an acceptance of who he is and a sense of belonging. He has never given up; never said he can't do it."

Team mom Adria Trembly adds: "Wrestling rewards those who have desire paired with the willingness to work hard. Sammie is proof of that." ■