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- Chicago

Nine months out of the year, most people called it the multipurpose room. In the high school basement, off the hall from the cafeteria, in the same corridor as the weight room and the phys. ed. lockers, the room felt vaguely purposeless, despite its name. Indoor batting cages were tucked against the near wall, with rolled-up greenery offering a convenient bench for changing in and out of tennis shoes. Insulating foam covered the steel beams across the ceiling, peppered with tiny dots which once served as the only entertainment during those mandatory screenings of “Your Body,” that the Health teacher had to show, using a TV cart as wide as the doorway and well-equipped with both video-casette and DVD players, minus one remote. Bored, I sometimes tried to count the speckles.

The left and back walls of the multipurpose room hinted at its deeper function, since Health class had another classroom and the batting cages could conceivably be moved elsewhere. The orange crash padding, bolted to the concrete of the left and back wall and seemingly out of place between between cheap, blue-white floor tiles and low-hanging fluorescent lights between the foam-covered beams, was permanent. In later years, the room would take on other, equally permanent signifiers of its primary purpose: a painted-orange “champions corner” where every practice ended with some self-directed fifty push-ups; a peg board and seven pull-up bars bolted just above the padding; and in the middle of these a hand-painted version of the wrestling team’s logo, and our unofficial name.

Officially, we were the “Webster Groves Statesmen Wrestling Team,” but the logo didn’t say “Statesmen Wrestling.” We didn’t print that ridiculous top hat and batton on our team hoodies, those symbols of a mascot as uninspired as the obligatory such-and-such high school Wolves, Wildcats and Tigers which populate every county of America in place of their apex namesakes. And we certainly didn’t let loose the gender-specific word, “Statesmen,” like a wild war cry when nothing else could capture that primal blend of cameraderie, pride, and dread which descended after weigh-ins. Instead our wall and our hoodies and our rallying cry was “Currahee,” a Cherokee word which the 101st Airborne Division adopted as their motto, popularized by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg’s *Band of Brothers*, which offers this translation: “We stand alone.”

On the first day of practice, Coach Lemay explained his understanding of the word. “It means, ‘We stand alone, together,’” he said. “Currahee.”

It was a fitting motto for a wrestling team, whose members grow more close and more comfortable with each other perhaps than those of any other high school sport, but also those who stand alone against another boy or girl, a stranger, who means to beat them. On the mat, no wrestler among us had any help save that roar from the sidelines—not “Webster,” not “Statesmen,” but “Currahee.”

On that first day in early November, sometimes after the regular football season but before the end of the post-season, the multipurpose room became the wrestling room. In that yearly ritual, which necessarily took place before any other, we dragged out the mats from the storage closet at the back of the room and taped them down, to remain there for the duration of the season. This was no simple matter. Each mat weighed more than seven freshmen and required extraordinary coordination of mostly new recruits to maneuver through the inconveniently positioned doorway. Upperclassmen, eager to get started, directed the younger boys and, in my years, two or three fearless young women.

Eventually, we finished the mats. We shed our shoes and applied antibacterial foam, which was universally required, to arm and leg and face and neck. For warmup, we jogged for ten minutes in a tight circle around the room, during which exercise the coaches, the upperclassmen, and the occasional daring freshman shouted, “Ten, ten, and ten.”

Instantly, everybody dropped, as if the coach or boy or girl had been a commanding officer of our namesake paratroopers announcing incoming fire, and fell into ten push-ups, ten crunches, and ten v-ups. We did them quickly. No one wanted to be the last one with his back on the mat, still counting dots in the ceiling foam.

After warmup, one of the wrestlers led the stretch. Ten seconds touch your toes. Ten seconds arm circles. Down on the ground and crack your back, then bridge up on the back of your head. Keep that head up. Neck stretch. Roll it out.

"All right, circle up," Lemay said when we had finished. By this he meant gather in a tight semicircle in the center of the mat, either standing or sitting at attention, on one knee. You weren't supposed to sit at ease, on your butt. Some of the freshmen didn't know. They quickly learned by imitation.

Lemay had a short speech on the first day. The longer speeches would come later, about pushing through and eating right – not staving ourselves, as the sterotype depicts, but not wolfing down a Christmas dish of sugar cookies after practice either. But early on, short speeches left time for extra conditioning, which was more important. Nobody entered that room with the physical fitness to last six minutes on the mat, but within three weeks they would have to. Coach knew that. He also knew that roughly half of the newcomers, along with a handful of upperclassmen, would quit before the second week. That was all right. He would rather have a dedicated roster than a full one.

So Lemay stood there and he gave us a few simple directions. Practice started at 3:00 P.M.. It ended at 5:30, but we should shower after, so plan on 6 P.M. for pickup. Saturday practices were optional, but unless you had a family reunion somewhere in Kansas, you should probably be there. No ride? Run. Too far? Coach or one of the upperclassmen will come and pick you up, shake you out of bed if necessary. Lemay didn't want anyone left out.

She tate to describe the man, in case the stereotypes about men with his appearance convey more about his character than his actio ut any mention of James Lemay would be incomplete if it did not convey the commanding nature of his physical presence. The man had an alpha-male gorilla's chest and a dancer's gait. His massive arms had tattoos on both biceps, some Chinese characters on one and a stylized Boba Fett on the other, all in black. He kept a shaved scalp and a cool head. He had a temper – it was hard not to, in that sport – but he demonstrated how to control his anger whenever it arose, a skill that stood in stark contrast to the coaches and fathers we sometimes saw at other schools, chewing out the kids who got pinned. When Lemay got mad, he carried it off by himself, and he came back calm.

Sometimes Lemay had a beard, and sometimes he kept his face clean. When the man shaved, he had a youthful, almost cherubic face that was difficult to reconcile with the rest of him. Bearded, he looked like the Godfather's bodyguard: intimidating. Every November, he transitioned from the f r state to the latter, beginning with the first practice and lasting until the beginning of dual meets. Even then, he ysti wouldn't shave until the Currahee wrestlers carried home a victory for the team, at which point every member of the varsity roster took turns with the razor, while Lemay leaned over a trash can, his face covered in Barbasol. Most of us had barely started shaving ourselves, but he trusted us all the same.

I still can't really explain what made me one of those who heard Lemay's longer speeches and helped to shave his beard, instead of those who decided that wrestling wasn't for hem. I didn't quit the first week or the second, and except for one season when classwork was too demanding, I stuck with wrestling to the end of high school. It didn't make much sense. By rights, I had no business stepping foor in that single-purpose room with forty other boys and two or three you women. I was awkward, nerdy, and still carried fifteen pounds of baby fat. Meets scared me. Tournaments were terrifying. I got pinned in the first seven or eight matches I wrestled and went to bed with red eyes from crying, that first year.

I had never felt so much like I belonged to any group of brothers and sisters as I did to the Currahee Wrestlers. The keyword in our rallying cry was Lemay's addition to the original: "We stand alone, together," on our hoodies, in our hearts, and seeping into the white concrete walls of the wrestling room every time we chanted, all together, "Currahee!"