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Nine months out of the year, most people called it the multipurpose room. In the basement, off the hall from the cafeteria, in the same corridor as the weight room and the lockers, the room had the proportions of a dance studio or a wine cellar. It was neither. In fact, it felt vaguely purposeless for those nine months. Collapsible batting cages hinted at one function, tucked against the near wall. Their rolled-up green offered a convenient bench for changing in and out of tennis shoes, as long as you could keep your balance. On the ceiling, an insulating foam covered gray steel beams, peppered with tiny black 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. I remember trying to count the speckles, bored.

The left and back walls of the multipurpose room reminded everyone of its most inherent role. Health had other classrooms and the batting cages could conceivably be moved elsewhere, but 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 a self-directed set of fifty push-ups; a peg board and seven pull-up bars bolted just above the padding, at different heights; and in the middle of these instruments of physical conditioning a hand-painted mural of the wrestling team’s logo emblazoned with our unofficial name, “Currahee Wrestling.”

The logo didn’t say, “Statesmen,” which was our official school mascot. No one complained. The Statesman was an abstract mascot whose signature top hat and twirling baton wouldn’t have inspired fish to swim. We didn’t identify with it. We didn’t don “Statesmen Wrestling” hoodies like plates of armor against the appraising glances of the Such-and-Such High School Eagles, Wolves, and Wildcats that populate every corner of America in place of their apex namesakes. And we certainly didn’t let loose that vague, unspirited monicker like a wild war cry when nothing else could capture the primal blend of cameraderie, pride, and dread which descended after weigh-ins. Instead, we grunted “Currahee” in the deepest voice that adolescent boys could muster, and everyone who heard us wondered what it meant.

To this day, I don’t exactly know what inspired Coach to change the name, separating us somewhat from the other sports at Webster. Perhaps he objected to the gendered nature of the term, which would have excluded our female members in spirit if not in practice. I do not know. Perhaps the vaguely nationalistic flavor of a “state’s man” rubbed him the wrong way, possessing too large a meaning for young wrestlers to carry with them on the mat. Certainly, Coach James Lemay preferred what “Currahee” meant. He chose the word based on an episode of *Band of Brothers*, where the 101st Airborne runs three miles up, three miles down Currahee mountain. Derived from a Cherokee word, “currahee” translates as “We stand alone together,” a fitting motto for a division of paratroopers who dropped behind enemy lines with no support except each other. James Lemay wanted it to fit his wrestling team as well.

On the first day of practice, the multipurpose room became the wrestling room. In that yearly ritual, which took place sometimes after the regular football season but before the end of the post-season, 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 doorway. The upperclassmen, eager to get started, directed the younger boys and two or three young women, also new.

Eventually, we finished the mats and got ready for practice. We shed our shoes and applied antibacterial foam 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 on the ceiling.

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.

James Lemay stood in the center. The man had a commanding presence without really trying. His workout shirts were never big enough for his biceps, which were tattooed with some Chinese characters and a stylized Boba Fett, all in black. He had a round face and a bald head that nestled in his thick neck like a silverback gorilla's. Cleanly shaven, the man looked almost cherubic, and he smiled broadly at the number of new faces.

Lemay had a short speech on the first day. The longer speeches would come later, about pushing through and eating right – not starving ourselves but not wolfing down a plate of brownies the night before a meet either – and about the mentality of wrestling. The longer speeches always had to do with mentality. But early on, short speeches left time for long conditioning, which was more important.

"This is a hard sport," he told us. "Every year, I ask myself if I should go easier on you guys. Maybe then more of you would stick around. But then I would be doing you a disservice, when you go out on that mat. If I don't push you harder than you can push yourselves, that's how you get pinned. And then you're the guy with his back on the mat still staring up at the ceiling, wondering what the hell happened, while the other guy is getting his hand raised. Or girl."

The upperclassmen nodded along with the speech, while a good number of freshmen wondered if we should be here. I was one of them. Before that Fall, I had never even thought about wrestling. I wasn't particularly athletic, except for a recurring bout of springtime baseball, and had other interests. I was awkward, bookish, and still carried fifteen pounds of baby fat underneath a curly mop of reddish brown hair which could have been a bird's nest. Really, I had no business stepping foot in that single-purpose room at all, except perhaps for Health class, and in my gut I knew I wouldn't be there long. Somewhere, the back of my head was already planning how to quit with some dignity, maybe join the chess club.

Practice had a rhythm to it. Lemay or one of the other coaches demonstrated a move, and everyone emulated it. Shooting the leg, you wanted to plant your foot and propel over the attacking knee, to grab their ankle. At first, we drilled against invisible legs in rows of eight, shooting successive shots from the batting cages to the orange padding, rolling over each knee with a smooth intensity until we smacked into opposite wall, jogged back to the beginning. New exercise: holding a squat position for two minutes at a time. On the mat, a wrestler maintained a low stance that set their quads on fire but made them more difficult to attack. You could always tell when your opponent was ready to get pinned when they started standing taller, exhausted.

Next move: sprawl. When someone shoots on you, you want to get your legs out of the way. You do that by slamming your hip down, with the full intention of slamming it into the mat. Without an actual attacker, that was what we did. A coach shouted, "Sprawl!" and two dozen hips hit the ground like an avalanche, only to pop back up, squat low for another fifteen, fourteen seconds before–"Sprawl!"–they dropped again.

At this point, even the upperclassmen struggled. We straightened whenever we felt like we could get away with it, and our clean sprawls diminished into half-hearted flops. If we hadn't already, we understood why wrestling was the only sport at Webster that didn't hold tryouts. It didn't need them.

At the end of it, it still wasn't over. "Start running," Lemay said.

Weary, all of us got up off the mat and started a light jog around the edge of it. Coach stood in the middle of us, arms folded, contemplating how to end practice. We had another fifteen minutes. He seemed content to let us run it out.

Then one of the seniors shouted, at the top of his lungs, "CURRAHEE!"

It was so surprising that the freshmen didn't know what to do. The response came from sophomores and juniors, who echoed, "Currahee!"

"CURRAHEE," the senior repeated.

“Currahee!”

“WE,” he continued.

“We!”

“STAND.”

“Stand!”

“ALONE.”

“Alone!”

“TOGETHER.” The senior’s breath almost gave out on the final syllable, but we echoed him all the same.

“Together!”

Somehow, we kept going, until the clock said 5:25. One of the freshmen even dared to start another round of “Currahee,” one of the young women.

“All right, circle up,” said Lemay, when it was finished.

He spent the last five minutes of practice going over logistics. Practice started at 3:00 P.M.. It ended at 5:30, but everyone should shower after, so we should plan on being done by 6 P.M.. 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 would come and pick you up and bring you breakfast if necessary. Lemay didn’t want anyone left out.

I listened in a daze, breathing hard. I barely heard when Lemay called us into a huddle.

“Now, practice is over,” he told us, with all our hands in the middle. “But do you see that corner?”

It was the back left.

“That’s champions corner,” Lemay said. “Practice is over, but if you want, you can do fifty pushups at the end of practice. Totally up to you. Now, ‘Currahee’ on three. One, two, three–”

“CURRAHEE!” we shouted.

I couldn’t believe practice was over. It felt like eight hours, not two and a half. The next day would be worse. We wouldn’t have to waste time at the beginning, pulling out the mats. I thought about quitting again. I didn’t think I could do this every day, for the next four months. The prospect of a tournament was terrifying. I didn’t know any of the other boys.

But instead of just leaving, I jogged over to the champions corner. Fifty pushups wasn’t that many, and you could take however long you wanted. Quite a few wrestlers were already there, clustered tightly. They counted to fifty with bated breaths, some of them rocking the reps like it was a race, others taking their time. They broke fifty into five sets of ten, two of twenty five, or two of twenty and one ten. It didn’t matter. They still did them together.

Without my asking, one of them made room for me. I threw my hips back and dropped to the mat. I could barely lift myself back up again, but I did. Fifty push-ups later, I finally headed off the mat. I would be back. I still believed I would probably quit eventually, but I could do one more day, one more week.

Currahee, after all.