**WRESTLING WITH ADVERSITY**

**Devin Carter didn’t let his father’s mid-year health scare stop him from becoming an All-American this season, and it motivates him toward his ultimate goal of being a national champion**

By Jimmy Robertson

Devin Carter has participated in a few heart-stopping matches throughout his career as a wrestler both in high school and collegiately here at Virginia Tech. Some of his matches came down to the final seconds, and those relatively few occasions gave his parents, Jeff and Debbie, a heart attack.

Actually, that’s not just an exaggeration.

Devin’s outstanding sophomore campaign was arguably the best season ever by a Tech wrestler. After all, he earned All-America honors, won his second ACC championship, won the ACC wrestler of the year honor and enjoyed a six-week stint as the No. 1-ranked wrestler in the country at 133 pounds.

But his season nearly crashed in late December. After having participated in hundreds of wrestling matches throughout his life, Devin filled the role his parents have filled for many years, becoming a spectator and watching as a heart attack nearly pinned Jeff Carter at the Midlands Championships held Dec. 28-30 in Evanston, Ill.

The incident, for lack of a better term, occurred Dec. 29 after Devin’s quarterfinal match in which he disposed of Stanford’s Ryan Mango. On the way back to the hotel, Jeff, who had been suffering from some chest pains that he thought centered on heartburn, started sweating. Debbie Carter, a nurse by trade, recognized the signs.

She dropped Devin off at the hotel and told him to go work out – Devin needed to shed some weight for the next day’s match. She said she was going to take her husband to NorthShore Skokie Hospital right next to the hotel to get him checked.

“She thought he was having a heart attack, and my dad was like, ‘No, no.’” Devin said. “He didn’t want to worry me. I was sitting in the back seat freaking out. After they dropped me off, my mom said, ‘I’m going to take him to the hospital across the street,’ and I was like, ‘Okay, call me.’”

The hospital’s close proximity to the hotel saved Jeff Carter’s life. He suffered a heart attack, and doctors operated to clear a blockage of an artery. He flat-lined once, requiring doctors to shock his chest.

He survived the surgery, and everything turned out for the better. Debbie Carter called Tech head coach Kevin Dresser and told him the news, and she told him to relay that to Devin and bring him to the hospital. Dresser immediately interrupted Devin’s workout and told him about his dad. He then took Devin to the hospital.

“The first thing I did was go up to him and ask him, ‘How are you feeling?’ and he goes, ‘How is your weight?’” Devin said. “It was definitely a relief. I didn’t know how I would feel at that exact moment, but that was the best feeling in the world after the worst feeling in the world.”

“I told him that he was here to wrestle, so go wrestle,” Jeff Carter said. “Everything with me was fine. I’m sure he was worried, and that it was difficult for him. But my situation was under control. He needed to go do what he came there to do.”

Devin Carter won the 133-pound crown at the Midlands, stunning top seed Tony Ramos of Iowa 6-4 in sudden victory. Carter knew he was in the midst of a special season.

But at that moment, standing in the hospital room and talking with his dad, he realized his most treasured accomplishment came from watching his father win.

Some people spend a lifetime trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives. Then there are the Devin Carters of the world. He figured it out when he was 4 years old.

His living room wrestling matches with brother Braden, his elder by two years, often got him into trouble. But Jeff Carter’s decision to enroll Braden and daughter Shannon into a wrestling rec league in High Point, N.J., simply opened Devin’s eyes to a whole new world.

Who knew that you could wrestle other people and not get into trouble? Sign me up, too, Devin begged.

“There was a rule in the rec program in New Jersey that you could start wrestling at the age of 6,” Devin said. “My dad talked to the coach, and the coach knew that he had wrestled, so they let me join on his team. So I started when I was 4 and have been doing it ever since.”

Devin’s passion for wrestling is probably hereditary. After all, Jeff Carter wrestled at Lebanon Valley College, a small college in Annville, Pa., not far from Hershey. Hence, he got his two sons and his daughter involved in the sport at an early age. Better for them to take their energies to the mat instead of tearing up each other.

Devin loved wrestling, and he also played baseball and football, at least up until high school. But those sports were simple hobbies, which he threw to the side before going off to high school.

“As soon as he started [wrestling], I thought he could be pretty good just because of the way he paid attention,” Jeff said. “You didn’t have to go over and over things with him. He had that mindset to learn, and he picked things up so fast. Then, he also had some things that you can’t teach.

“We started taking him to national competitions when he was in, like, the third, fourth or fifth grade – somewhere around then. He had the ability to hang with the best kids in the country. After a loss, he’d watch video, and then he’d say, ‘I know I can beat that kid.’ He really started maturing then.”

Devin’s wrestling career in New Jersey came to an end before he reached high school age. Jeff was working in Manhattan at the time and lost his job. He found another one, but it didn’t pay as well, particularly in an area where the cost of living just keeps sky-rocketing.

Plus, he and wife Debbie had gotten tired of the fast-paced, high-traffic, pressure-filled lifestyle of northern New Jersey. So they decided to look for a new residence in the South. They wanted a smaller, quieter and safer community to raise their three kids, but they also wanted their kids to go to a good school with a combination of great academics and athletics.

Those factors led them Christiansburg, Va., the home of Christiansburg High School and one of the best wrestling teams in the nation.

“We knew some folks who lived in the Christiansburg area,” Jeff said. “They talked about what a nice, safe, comfortable environment it was, with good athletics and academics.

“So we came down one weekend for a visit and loved it. We went back and immediately put our house on the market.”

Jeff landed a job at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant, better known to locals as the “Radford Arsenal.” Debbie secured three interviews and would have no trouble finding employment in her line of work as a nurse. They sold the house, packed up the family and moved to the New River Valley.

The move paid off handsomely, as both Braden and Devin excelled as students and on the wrestling mat for Christiansburg coach Daryl Weber, a 1996 national champion at the University of Iowa. Braden finished second in the state on two occasions and was part of three state championship teams. He currently attends Newberry College in South Carolina, wrestling there at 174 pounds.

Devin became one of the most sought after recruits in the nation. He won three individual state championships for Christiansburg – only a loss in the state final his freshman season kept him from four state titles – and finished with a career mark of 199-15.

He ultimately signed with Virginia Tech because of Dresser and his Iowa connections.

“Dresser is an Iowa guy, and Darryl [Weber] is an Iowa guy,” Devin said. “I was used to wrestling under Darryl for four years in high school. He got me to where I was, and I like the in-your-face style and the old-fashioned-hard-work-beats-talent style. I was working out with Dresser and the Tech team with the [wrestling] club, and I really liked the way he coached. I was used to him and comfortable around him. We were on the same page, so it seemed like the right thing to do.

“Plus, the Tech campus is right here. It’s near home, and it’s really nice here.”

His career has been nice, too. Quite nice, actually. The 20-year-old sophomore hasn’t lost an ACC match since arriving on campus. Even his losses are close – he hasn’t been pinned in any loss.

In January, both *Intermat* and *Wrestling Report* ranked him as the No. 1 wrestler in the nation at 133 pounds. He became just the second Tech wrestler to reach the No. 1 status (Scott Justus, 2002, 184 pounds).

Carter, though, kept it in perspective.

“I knew why I was ranked No. 1 – two guys ranked ahead of me lost to guys they shouldn’t have,” Carter said. “We saw it coming, but it didn’t change anything. I actually liked not being ranked No. 1. It’s much more fun to be the hunter than the hunted. Not that it’s too much pressure, but it puts a big target on you, and that’s no fun.”

All that success hasn’t come without a few lumps. As a freshman last year, he lost 10-2 to Oklahoma State’s Jordan Oliver at last year’s National Duals. Oliver went on to win the national title and was a runner-up this year.

“He killed me,” Carter admitted.

This year, Carter lost 8-6 to No. 11 seed Steven Keith of Harvard at the NCAA Championships. That loss eliminated his dreams of winning a national title, but Carter rallied to become an All-American, finishing fifth at 133 pounds.

Those rare moments have been humbling and serve as a reminder that even he, for all his greatness, needs to improve because his goals demand it.

“My goal is obviously to be an NCAA champion,” he said. “I’ve got two more years left, so I’ve got two more times, and two times [winning the national title] would be nice. But the ultimate goal is to win a national title before I leave Tech.”

It’s a lofty goal. After all, the highest finisher in Tech’s wrestling history is Brandon Glover, who came in third at 130 pounds in 1959. But Carter doesn’t lack confidence in his abilities.

“I wouldn’t make it a goal if I didn’t think I could,” he said.

He also wants to see the Hokies win an ACC title as a team. This year, they finished third behind Maryland and Virginia. Last year, they came in second behind the Terrapins.

But next year, Tech gets Ty Mitch, Jesse Dong and possibly David Marone back from injuries. Plus, Jarrod Garnett, a three-time NCAA qualifier, returns after redshirting this past season. The Hokies return potentially eight guys who have qualified for the NCAA Championships at some point in their careers.

“Not to sound cocky, but I don’t think anyone in the ACC is going to touch us next year because we’ve got so many guys coming back,” Carter said. “We’ve got so much potential for next year. I think we could get in the top 10 at nationals next year, maybe even in the top five.”

For that reason, Carter would like to hold off on redshirting. Most wrestlers do redshirt at some point, and the extra year of training and the added maturity that goes with it usually makes for a better wrestler.

That decision – and whether he moves up a class because of his body growing out of the 133-pound class – will be made later in the fall. For now, he’ll continue to train, refine his technique and remain focused on the goal of being a champion.

He wants to be like his father, a champion with a victory over a more worthy adversary than any Devin will face in his career. After all, heart attacks rarely lose.

“Devin’s driven to be a national champion,” Jeff Carter said. “I was looking at him the other day, and I thought, ‘This isn’t the same kid I taught 10 years ago.’ He’s just matured, and he’s motivated. His success is a testament to how hard he is working.

“He’s a little obsessive-compulsive and anal retentive, to be honest.”

Then Jeff said, with a chuckle.

“I’d say he gets that from me.”