

TO BE THE BEST
Book Three: Overtime

By H. L. Hertel

HH Castle-Mac Publishing
St Louis Park, MN

Copyright © 2016 H. L. Hertel
ISBN: 978-0-9826684-1-2

Prologue

Nick Castle watched the ceiling getting further away and braced himself for the imminent impact with the mat.

Chester Troftgruben's sweat-soaked practice shirt read, "Watch Them Fly" and had a picture of two wrestlers on it in very much the same positions he and Nick were currently in – Nick, unfortunately, resembled the wrestler being thrown – frozen in mid-air, feet facing the lights.

Thud.

Upon hitting the mat, Nick immediately rolled to his belly before Chester could earn any back points. Defensive positioning and countering had been the focus of the prior two days of wrestling camp. The lessons had resonated well with Nick, although apparently not well enough to have full effect versus the likes of Chester.

Oddly, the two boys had become fairly close friends over the course of the summer. Having only wrestled each other in one regular season match during their two illustrious careers, a junior-year pre-Christmas Tournament semi-final match which saw Chester give Nick a sound thrashing, the two had no reason to build up any animosity. Further, they soon found significant common ground as each had finished his respective junior year ranked high going into the state tournament (Nick first at 140 pounds and Chester second at 152 pounds) but there was unfinished business for both as fall approached.

Nick both relished and despised being matched with Chester as his practice partner. Although he had added nearly ten pounds of muscle since February, Nick still looked scrawny and awkward versus the broader, stronger Troftgruben who himself had been lifting and now weighed close to 170 pounds. This was the second and final summer camp the two had attended in their home state and, given the dearth of similarly-sized wrestlers who could give Chester any kind of competition, Nick had become the default opponent assigned to Chester by the camp coaches. This pushed Nick to his limits and made him better while at the same time bruising both the smaller boy's body and ego.

The two had also crossed paths at a pair of out-of-state camps and had roomed together at both the second camp and at Junior Nationals. Nick's older brother Ron referred to Chester as "The Cheater" since he had been held back in eighth grade for no apparent reason. He certainly seemed bright enough to Nick,

which partially confirmed Ron's conjecture that Chester had intentionally failed in order to notch an additional year of physical and emotional maturity versus his wrestling opponents. With Chester's birthday in early November and Nick's in late July, it created a gap of nearly two years.

All of this aside, Nick enjoyed his practice partner's company when they weren't on the mat. He looked forward to crossing paths at several tournaments during the season as their weight difference would certainly keep them from going head-to-head.

As Nick worked to stand up and gain hand control, he pitied the wrestlers who would face either him or Chester this season. The two had both been so diligent and focused on their goals of winning the state championship that others would be best served to stay out of their way.

Chapter 1

The vehicle made its way slowly down the interstate. Blizzard conditions were keeping most drivers off of the road ... but most drivers did not need to reach their destination this badly.

The car's appearance was as pristine as its driver was tarnished, his body tense as he leaned forward, hoping that it would help him see through the snow.

Five years. Had it really been that long? In some ways, it felt like a lifetime since he had more-or-less been run out of town. Over that time, he had had many reasons for making the trip back. Heck, his in-laws lived just over an hour away. Yet, he had always found an excuse to not come back to the place which held so many good memories entangled with and strangled by just as many bad ones.

He let himself grin as he saw the sign for the second exit. It had taken nearly fifteen minutes to get from the first city limits sign three miles back to this exit he needed. Conditions were getting worse as he engaged his blinker and headed for the exit ramp, the one that would send him through downtown and bring him to his final destination.

He turned on the radio, happy to finally get a signal and fumbled with the dial until he found something reasonable. Don Henley's New York Minute had never ranked among his favorites but it seemed strangely symbolic of his plight. He let it play.

It took another fifteen minutes of white knuckle driving before he was able to cross the bridge. It was fortunate for the man that the car had the muscle he lacked these days, propelling him through the drifts in the half-plowed streets and eventually bringing him to a parking spot in the Whitey's Wonderbar lot.

He said a quick prayer before leaving the car. This was his final hope. It had to work out.

Donning his gloves and pulling a hat over his bald head, he nearly collided with an inebriated man, making his way through the lot.

"Sweet ride," the drunk man commented. "1965 Mustang."

“ '66,” Sean MacCallister corrected him with a small smile, and continued his journey into the bar.

* * *

The inside of the bar had not changed much over time. It still reeked of cigarette smoke, stale beer and plenty of other unpleasant odors.

Sean went straight to the bar, knowing that what he sought was not on the menu. There weren't many patrons out on such a miserable night. There were a few tables of college kids who now seemed awfully young to him. Across the bar was a long-haired, hippie-looking kid in major need of a shave. His stringy hair and beard were unkempt while his bleary eyes were tell-tale signs that he was well beyond the legal limit. Other than an old couple that was getting ready to leave, nobody else was in the bar.

"What will you have?" the bartender asked.

All Sean really wanted was a water and some information but he felt sheepish about not ordering. He was down to his last \$50 and his credit card was maxed out so he would have to find ways to economically make something work.

"Can I get your appetizer menu?" he asked. "Also, is Kelly Veers working tonight?"

The bartender stopped.

"Veers? He quit six months ago."

Sean's heart sank ... after making all of that effort, driving a hundred miles through snow and cold and all to end up sitting in a dank bar by himself. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. After his recent months of pain and anguish, he really would have welcomed something, anything, going right tonight ... perhaps he had just been made to suffer.

When the bartender came back with a menu, Sean looked up and noticed that the hairy guy across the bar was staring at him. It made him uncomfortable but, when the man nodded at him, he nodded back to be polite.

Sean began looking at the menu but could see in his peripheral vision that the hippie was getting up from his seat and staggering around the bar toward him.

"Please let him be heading to the bathroom," MacCallister hoped. The last thing Sean needed was to be hit up for money or to find other trouble.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sean could see the man get to the corner of the bar and stop. He was getting an uneasy feeling that the man would soon make his way over and talk to him.

"Drunk," Sean thought, trying to focus on the menu and ignore the man. "Just come over and hit me up for a drink or some spare change and be done with it."

For a moment, he became self-righteous, not able to recall a time in the days that he was drinking and constantly broke that he had ever begged strangers for alcohol. With all of the progress he had made recovering in some areas of his life, he figured that his seemingly unending monetary woes would have to improve eventually.

"Tostacos are only a buck?" MacCallister asked the bartender, hoping that the conversation would encourage the hairy man to move on.

"Only after 10:00," the bartender replied.

Sean fumed a bit as he sensed the man to his left take a step closer.

"Do you have a problem?!" Sean didn't vocalize the question yet but promised himself that he would if the man approached further. Sensing more movement, he took a deep breath and turned to let the man have it.

"Coach?"

The word and the voice speaking it created a sudden surge of emotion. Sean reeled to look at the man and got a bit misty at the face he saw.

"Nick?"

"I thought that was you, Coach. I almost didn't recognize you without your hair."

Sean stood and, two steps later, gave his stoic former protégé a big bear hug, trying not to let the younger man see him tear up.

"It looks like you're making up for all of the hair I shaved off," Sean replied.

"Yeah," Nick smirked, slurring his words a bit. "I decided to grow a finals beard at the end of spring semester."

"You know you're supposed to shave that when finals are over," Sean remarked.

"It was more efficient to just leave it so I wouldn't have to grow a fresh one this semester," Nick joked.

The two stood and looked at each other for another few moments.

"Do you have time to catch up a bit?" Sean finally asked, knowing that he himself had no real place to go.

"My girlfriend was supposed to pick me up but, judging by the argument we had last night and the fact that she was supposed to

be here two hours ago, I'm guessing that I may have all the time in the world."

The two found a booth and ordered some appetizers. Nick switched to drinking water while Sean ordered a hot tea to help remove the chill.

"I can't believe you're old enough to be in here," Sean commented. "Last time I saw you, you were in high school."

"... and now I'm 21," Nick interrupted. "A lot has happened since you coached Ron and me at Riverside my junior year."

Sean thought about how solid Nick had been that year and wondered what had happened. Nick had been ranked first in state going into the state tournament that year and still had another season to go. Surely he must have gotten some interest from college programs.

"Well, why don't you fill me in on the details of your senior season?" Sean requested, and immediately kicked himself as Nick's face got solemn. Sean bit his lip, remembering the one thing he knew for sure – how the state tournament had ended awkwardly.

Yet Nick seemed to want to talk.

"Well," the younger man began, "my senior season was literally just a continuation of my junior year. I went straight from the high school season as a junior into spring Freestyle and Greco, into summer camps and tournaments, and then ran cross country and lifted weights all fall to get ready. I was convinced that I was unstoppable and everything started perfectly until life proved otherwise ..."

Chapter 2

Nick entered the Riverside wrestling room and looked around. He knew he wasn't supposed to be there but surely it was fine given the circumstances.

There was his brother's name, carved into the Ring of Honor, commemorated alongside Grunseth, Palmer, Welsh and so many others. More importantly to Nick on this day was that a mason was there, carving the next name into the brick wall.

Nick was downright giddy. How many years had he waited for this day? How many thousands of hours had he spent practicing, preparing and competing to win a state title. And now, it would be the icing on the cake, a state title and a place in the Ring of Honor to cement his place in history. He stood and watched the mason as the "N" started to take shape in the bricks. The boy closed his eyes and breathed deeply, completely at peace with the world.

"Nick, you've got to go."

Busted! The peace turned to fear as the odd-looking man in the suit walked toward him.

"You don't belong here. Let's go," the man repeated.

"But ..." Nick motioned toward the mason but the man was gone, Nick's name was gone ... the wall was completely untouched.

The dread filled and overwhelmed him like a flash flood, appearing out of nowhere and sweeping him away with hopelessness. He had not won the state title and he didn't belong on Kreitzer's Riverside team. He began to shudder and couldn't speak or move.

"Nick?"

The boy awoke to his father's voice.

"Nick, we've got to go if you're going to ride into town with me."

The man paused and looked at his shaken son.

"Are you ok?"

Nick's heart was beating fast as he tried to remind himself that it was a dream. It was a recurring nightmare that had haunted him

a dozen times since the end of his junior year but it was only a dream.

The boy opened his dry mouth and nodded, looking to the man while leaving his warm covers for the chilly morning air, uncertain as to whether the goose bumps were from the nightmare or the brisk air.

"Power through it, Nick!" the boy thought. That is behind you now. Focus on this year."

This morning's workout would get him one step closer to his dream of winning a state wrestling championship and to making the nightmare disappear for good.

**To Continue reading, order
TO BE THE BEST : OVERTIME**

