

TO BE THE BEST
Book One: Six Minutes

BY H.L. HERTEL

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Prologue

The two wrestlers faced each other, neither blinked. This was the championship match. While both boys felt unbeatable, only one would prove himself to be so tonight.

William Castle sat in the bleachers and relished the contest. Wrestling was his first love and still held a special place in his heart, despite the fact that it had fallen to number three on his “love list.” Yes, a wife and family had taken the top two spots. He glanced down at his boys, Ron and Nick, sitting to either side of him. It was heartwarming to see them both completely mesmerized by the event.

The wrestler in green was the first to make his move. He shot in on his opponent’s legs, his quickness catching the boy in red off guard. As the boy in red scrambled to his stomach, his opponent took a position of control. The referee held up two fingers exclaiming, “Takedown, two points green.”

William was glad to see that the referee had given the green ankle-band to the wrestler in green and the red band to his opponent. This would make it easier for William’s boys to follow the match as he attempted to describe the sport’s basic rules.

“You see, once he takes him to the mat, gets behind him and has control, that is a takedown. He gets two points,” William instructed.

The boys, both with mouths hanging open, nodded without taking their eyes off the match.

William had to smile. He wasn’t surprised to see eight-year-old Ron so interested. The boy was a bit of a terror and was probably watching the match more to find ideas for playground fights than he was to learn a new form of competition. Ron’s jet-black hair was a genetic gift from his mother but William would be hard-pressed to name the ancestor responsible for the boy’s wild, aggressive personality.

Aggression was paying off for the wrestler in green. He managed to turn his opponent to his back and was holding him there as the referee watched closely. At this point, all it would take was for red’s shoulder blades to touch the mat for an instant. That would be a pin and the match would be over. After eight seconds on his back, the red wrestler was able to return to his stomach and temporary safety.

“Near fall, three points green,” bellowed the ref.

William felt the familiar tug on his left hand. He glanced down at Nick, whose curiosity allowed him to briefly break his stare and whisper, "Daddy, what was that?"

Squeezing the boy's hand, William explained, loud enough for Ron to hear as well, that a "near fall" was also known as "back points." It was a reward, in the form of two or three points, which was given to a wrestler who holds his opponent's back to the mat but does not succeed in pinning him.

Nick squeezed his dad's hand and smiled before turning back to the match. Yes, this was William's six-and-a-half-year-old cozy boy. Dressed in a *Star Wars* sweatshirt, he was much more comfortable playing with toys than he was getting scuffed in physical competition. His scratches and bruises were less from his own adventures than from his older brother's regular tormenting. His light-brown hair was similar to what was left of William's own.

As time ticked down on the first two-minute period, the red wrestler on the bottom scrambled to his feet, broke green's grip and faced his opponent, earning him an escape. The referee signaled for a point, "Escape, one point red."

Four seconds later, a foghorn sounded, ending the period.

"That was a fast two minutes," thought William. He remembered his high school matches. Those three periods totaled only six minutes but could feel like a week.

The referee flipped a red and green coin. It came up green, giving the choice of starting position for the second period to the green wrestler. The boy looked at his corner and, after receiving a signal from his coach, opted to defer his decision until the third period. The boy in red was then given the choice and chose "down."

"Of course," thought William. To less experienced onlookers, choosing to start a period on the bottom seemed like a vulnerable position. However, to many wrestlers, this was like getting a free point as it is often easier to escape from an opponent than to hold an opponent down.

Upon the referee's direction, "Bottom man set," red got down on his hands and knees in the middle of the mat. Green circled behind him and received the signal, "Top man on." Green grabbed red's left elbow with one hand and put his other arm around red's waist.

The quiet murmur of the crowd filled the gym before the referee signaled, "Ready...wrestle."

The two boys lunged forward with red trying to get away and green trying to turn red to his back. In the impending flurry, green

made a mistake, lost control and found himself on the bottom with red taking control of him.

The referee's exclamation, "Reversal, two points red," was lost to most as many fans got excited, yelling and cheering for red. The referee signaled for two points.

Again, William felt the tug on his left hand and heard his younger son's voice.

"Daddy, what was that?"

"That was a reversal, Nicky. When he's on the bottom and turns things around so that he's on top, he gets two points."

Nick nodded in satisfaction, "A reversal, I know that."

"No you don't!" Ron was able to tear his attention away from the match long enough to argue with his brother.

"Yes I do!"

William intervened, "Stop it you two! Watch the match."

"Do not!" Ron continued.

"Ron!" His father's tone was enough to quiet the boy.

The brothers glared at each other for a moment before turning their attention back to the match.

* * *

An hour later, the tournament was over. The wrestlers took their turns moving proudly to the awards stand, getting their medals and getting their pictures taken. William's memories drifted back to his high school days, standing tall on the platform in several tournaments. He had led the boys down to the mat for a closer view of the ceremony.

"Daddy?"

"Yes Nick."

The boy made a few clumsy moves against an invisible opponent, which vaguely resembled some takedowns he had witnessed. "When I grow up, I'm going to be the best wrestler there is."

Not to be outdone, his brother piped in, "No, I'm gonna be the best!"

"Why did this always have to be such a contest?" William thought.

"Ron, stop hassling your little brother. There are lots of weight classes. You can both be the best."

Ron glared quickly at his brother with big brown eyes. He was quite fluid as he too pretended to wrestle an opponent. Under his breath he whispered, "I'm gonna be the best."

He then turned and stared intensely at the boys on the podium as a man in a suit handed the gold medal to the boy on the top step. “I’m gonna be the best,” he repeated softly. The look in his eyes would make any adult hesitate to doubt him.

Chapter 1

A whistle split the air.

“Stalemate!” The referee’s voice was loud and squeaky. “Neither man able to improve his position.”

“There are probably a lot of people watching who don’t know what a stalemate is,” thought Ron. It would stand to reason that many people who don’t even care about wrestling would pay attention to the state high school championships. For all he knew, the entire world was watching the title match of the 125-pound weight class.

An instant later, Ron allowed himself to fall back into a sitting position on the mat, releasing his opponent, Tony Simms. Tony was clearly exhausted; his chest heaved as he looked back at Ron. He looked like he would soon be ill.

“This is good,” thought Ron. All year, he had used a three-tiered system. First, he would try to beat his opponent based on pure technique. This worked in about three-quarters of his matches. Unfortunately, Simms was a tough competitor and had come out aggressive, quickly scoring points on Ron and forcing him to adjust to his back-up plan – winning on conditioning. Ron had wrestled in such a way during the second period that it had forced both boys to use a lot of energy. His superior conditioning was now paying off, which was fortunate as he did not want to have to try to out-muscle Simms, Ron’s option of last resort.

With his wet, black hair plastered to his forehead, Ron raced quickly back to the center of the mat. He had some concern that his opponent’s last elbow had been too well placed. He noticed the copper-like taste in his mouth and knew that the blood would soon begin flowing from his nostril.

“HURRY UP!” Ron’s thoughts were intense as Simms sluggishly crawled to the center of the mat and assumed the bottom referee’s position.

“Top man on,” the referee beckoned.

As Ron hurriedly followed directions, the referee noticed the blood appearing below his right nostril.

“Injury time out red,” he bellowed.

“I’m all right!” Ron exclaimed, not wanting to relinquish his advantage.

“Son, go to your corner and get that cleaned up,” the referee demanded.

With a huff, Ron obeyed. As he walked back to his corner, he noticed Nick and his dad sitting tensely at the side of the mat. They looked concerned. He didn’t know whether this was due to his bleeding or his pending run-in with Coach Granger.

“Forty-eight seconds,” Granger growled from Ron’s corner as the boy approached. “Forty-eight seconds for you to get your act together and turn him.”

That was the style difference between Granger and Ron. His coach was always trying to make him wrestle slow and steady. For Ron, it was not the way to win matches.

“Turn him? I’m not going to turn him...”

“You’re not going to take him down again,” Granger interrupted as Assistant Coach Dean stuffed a wad of cotton up Ron’s nose. “You’re currently tied. You turn him, get your points and wait this thing out.”

“He’s tired,” Ron began to argue.

“And your bleeding just gave him time to rest! You turn him! If he’s so tired that he clams up and gets called for stalling, that’s one more point and a state title for us.”

With a nose full of cotton, Ron looked at Assistant Coach Dean who nodded in agreement. Knowing better than to try to plead his case, he hurried back to the center of the mat. Simms took his time returning to the center. It was evident to Ron that his opponent had gotten the chance to catch his wind.

With Tony once again set in bottom position, the referee invited Ron, “Top man on.”

As Ron mounted, the noise around him suddenly disappeared. The only sound he heard was the referee’s voice, “Ready... wrestle.”

The flurry that followed lasted only seven seconds. Simms attempted to get up while Ron worked to break him down. The two boys ended at the edge of the mat and were called out of bounds. Ron looked at the scorers’ table. The score of ten to ten gave him an incentive to rush back to the mat’s center.

As Simms sluggishly followed, Ron looked to his corner and pleaded, giving Coach Granger the “push away” sign. If he could only get permission to let his opponent go, he knew that he could

take the boy down again and win the match, twelve to eleven. Granger's only response was a glare as he pointed at Ron to mount.

"Top man on!"

As Ron mounted, he felt the anger swell inside of him. Who was Granger to decide how he would wrestle this match? Yes he was the coach but, realistically, this was the last match of the season. It wasn't like there would be an opportunity for the coach to suspend him from the team for insubordination.

Lost in his own little world, Ron's attention changed directions as he heard the words, "Ready...wrestle!"

Again Ron frantically tried to turn Simms to his back while the boy desperately tried to get away. As he tried a number of holds to try and gain control, Ron failed to get a firm grip on his sweaty opponent who was nearly hyperventilating. Fourteen seconds later, the two ended their rally off the mat again.

Quickly getting to his feet, Ron looked at the clock, which now read twenty-seven seconds. He looked to Granger and again, with a pleading look, gave the "push away" sign to which Granger angrily mouthed "NO!"

"Top man on!"

Ron walked over to Simms and began to mount. "No!" he thought and got back to his feet.

With a quick glare at Granger, Ron positioned himself in a standing position behind Simms. He placed his hands flat in the middle of Simms' back, thumbs touching. He would let his opponent go, giving the boy a single point, and then take him down to get two points and the win. It was time for Ron Castle to wrestle his match.

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