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**Man In Full**

**AS THE COACH AT A HIGH SCHOOL NEAR CHICAGO, MIKE POWELL HAS DONE MORE THAN CREATE STATE WRESTLING CHAMPIONS. HE'S TAUGHT BOYS HOW TO BE MEN AND PROVIDED AN EXAMPLE OF COURAGE UNDER THE MOST TRYING PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

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**What does** it mean to be a man?

It is a late-spring night in 1997 on frat row in Bloomington, Ind., and the blood is starting to thump in Mike Powell's temples. Behind him, the wiry dude with the wild eyes is yelling on the steps of the frat house. "Stay the f--- off my porch!" he roars. "Come back here, and I'll kill you." The guy's friends are right there with him, taunting along.

Powell grimaces. No one talks to him this way. He's 205 pounds of pure fury—an All-America wrestler in Indiana's highly rated program, a sophomore on track to compete in the Olympics. Charismatic, darkly handsome and fueled by a confidence that borders on arrogance, he's the kind of guy who wears ripped tank tops to parties, who wedges a Junior Mint in the crevice of his cauliflowered left ear and dares girls to eat it, knowing they will. Those close to Powell see his gentler side—how he's the only male in a women's studies class, how if you asked his three roommates to name their best friend, they'd all say Mike Powell. But to the lugs at Bloomington bars and parties he is only the most alpha of males, someone to test themselves against, and he is happy to oblige. In his senior year at Oak Park and River Forest High near Chicago, he went 42--0 on the mat and won the state title. Since then he's also undefeated in bar fights.

Tonight Powell has left a frat party with five other wrestlers, and now he hears them yell back and senses the brawl taking shape. He turns, and the night becomes electric. It's six versus 30, but that doesn't matter. Powell puts one guy in a choke hold, flips another over his back. A burly young man comes flying in; Powell catches him and bangs his skull on a car, cracking it like a coconut. He looks up, the rage in his eyes. *Who else wants some?*

The angry, drunk kids continue to rush at him, and Powell dispatches them with frightening efficiency. They don't know who they are up against, how much power lies in Powell's 5'10" frame. In a few days he will be chewed out by his coach for fighting and lose about $2,000 off his scholarship. Those reprimands will fade, though. What will remain is the truth of this night and many others like it: *No one messes with Mike Powell.*

**Now it** is March 2009, 12 years later, and Powell stands with his arms outstretched on the sideline at the Illinois state team wrestling tournament, awaiting the impact. At 33, he has become the man he always aspired to be: coach of a top high school squad, fiancé of a beautiful woman he adores, father figure to so many lost boys.

After years of building a program, of spending 18 hours a day living and breathing OPRF High wrestling, he's done it: His alma mater is the 3A champion. Now here comes Sammy Brooks, the freshman who dominated the clinching match, sprinting across the mat with eyes afire. Sammy leaps into Powell's arms, 152 pounds of joy clutching his rib cage. Powell hugs him tight, inhaling the sweat on his chest. And then the coach who can bench-press 300 pounds, who can go days without rest, whom former Indiana teammate Eric Pitts describes as "the strongest human being I've ever known," feels an unfamiliar sensation: weakness. Powell's left leg buckles, followed by his right. He stumbles backward, into the void.

**What if** you woke up one morning with the flu and it never went away?

It is two weeks after the state tournament, and the OPRF wrestlers have gathered in their high-ceilinged workout room. Of the 3,000-plus students at the school, almost 60% are white and almost 30% are black, and the team's makeup reflects it. The wrestlers are joking and showing off their six-pack abs when Powell walks in and makes for the pull-up bar. "Let me show you punks how this is done," he announces with a grin.

Ever since the state finals Powell has felt strangely tired, but he's convinced it will fade. Leaping, he catches the bar with an overhand grip and yanks himself up, the veins in his biceps ridging, his back muscles compressing. In the past Powell ripped off 40 pull-ups, sometimes 50. On this day, though, he stalls after four, as if his power supply has been cut off.

Around him, his team giggles. "Damn, Powell," says Brooks. "You must be getting old."

Powell stares at the bar, disbelieving. His entire life he's been the strongest guy in the room. Growing up in nearby Forest Park, he was doing pull-ups at age three. By four he could do handstand push-ups and had earned the nickname Mikey Powerful. In eighth grade he set a school mark for pull-ups; at Indiana he set multiple weight-room records. Angry, he tries again but doesn't make it past three pull-ups. Again the boys laugh, only this time nervously. *Is Powell playing a joke on us? If not, this is weird.*

This is, after all, *Coach Powell.* No one attacks coaching, or life, as he does. This is the man who signs his e-mails *in relentless pursuit,* who works 18-hour days and is the first one back in the gym, smiling and hopping around. "We may not be the most talented," Powell tells his wrestlers, "but no one in the state of Illinois will outwork us." During the regular season he ran the boys through torturous exercises, timing them as they pushed weighted sleds through the rough grass of the school outfield, the boys so drenched in sweat that they took their soggy workout clothes home in knotted plastic bags. He tacked a poster board labeled MANLINESS on the training room wall so he could track each wrestler's personal bests: how many times he could flip a 100-pound tire in two minutes, how many times he could clean-and-press half his body weight in four minutes, how many dips and pull-ups he could rip off in 10 minutes.

The boys might have bristled at the demands if they'd come from a different coach. But not from Powell, for he was right there beside them. He pushed the sled and heaved the tire and did the dips and kept going after the boys faltered. He wrestled them all, relying on his quickness against 103-pounders and his power against heavyweights. He challenged them to push-up contests. He dared them to be true warriors—to become, as he put it, "not just good but great men."

That was a theme he brought up almost every day, because Powell believed that the idea of masculinity had become twisted in modern society, that it had become derogatory to call someone *macho* or *manly.* "Try to be a different kind of man," he told them. "One who's true to his word, who's respectful to women and his family."

"Macho men can also be sissies!" he'd shout in his booming, raspy voice. "You can grind it out in a grudge match and then go read Shakespeare. You can read *The New York Times* and lift weights."

Once kids joined the team, they became part of Powell's family. He arranged tutors for boys who struggled in school. He drove one recently graduated wrestler 300 miles to college and helped him move into his dorm. Every summer he took the entire team on a backpacking trip, one year to Glacier National Park in Montana, the next to Zion National Park in Utah, paying for the kids who couldn't afford it. He took the ungainly boys aside and talked to them about girls; he took the cocky ones aside and talked to them about the value of finding mentors. Always he gave them love. Before every match he kissed the forehead of Ellis Coleman, one of the roughest of the rough, whose father and stepfather had both spent time in prison. Before every meet Powell said, "Character, boys, that's all it's ever been about, all it will ever be about and all it's about tonight."

The boys idolized him. They walked like Powell, as if carrying imaginary holsters on their hips. They talked like him, referring to anything subpar as *jayvee,* as in, "There are two options for lunch: the good sandwich place and the jayvee one around the corner." The older boys cultivated cauliflower ears, lighting up at the first bruising. Several wrestlers started a Facebook page called WWMPD, for What Would Mike Powell Do. "Whatever Powell said held 100 times the weight of a parent, teacher, anyone," says Michele Weldon, whose three sons wrestled for him. "The boys craved his approval. They would do anything they could for him."

That's why that afternoon in the workout room was so unsettling. As Brooks puts it, "We'd never seen him like that before, so weak."

**If Powell** was worried, he didn't show it. Just as he explained away the stumble at state finals—"I just tripped," he said—he rationalized this lapse. His body was recovering from a long season, he said. He just needed to eat better, get more sleep and work out harder. The weakness would pass.

But it didn't. That week he went for a run and had to slow to a walk after two blocks. He slid under the bench press and the bar plummeted to his chest on the first rep. A few days later he climbed onto the roof of the house in Forest Park he shared with his fiancée, Elizabeth Hess, to fix a floodlight. Leaning into the slope as he worked, he felt his legs give out. He toppled backward and rolled into the gutter. Lying there 15 feet above the pavement, legs shaking, he broke down.

The next day he saw his general practitioner. "You need to see a neurologist right away," she said. But Powell had practice and a full schedule of workouts. "I'm not going to miss school for this," he said. "Can I do it in three weeks?"

The doctor's voice rose. "Cut the bull----, Mike," she said. "You have serious issues with your blood work. You need to be seen *now.*"

Upon seeing Powell, the neurologist was so concerned that he had a colleague perform a muscle biopsy immediately. Still, Powell didn't slow down. Three days later he flew to Las Vegas for the dual nationals. At times, two of his wrestlers, identical twins Chris and Nick Dardanes, had to carry him down the long hallways between gyms. More than once Powell slunk out of matches, too embarrassed by his wobbling legs to be seen by peers and friends.

On Friday, April 11, the neurologist called and broke the news: Powell had a muscle-wasting disease called polymyositis. Powell's first reaction was relief. It wasn't lupus or ALS or muscular dystrophy, as he'd feared. How bad could it be?

On Sunday he flew home. That night, after dinner with Hess, he descended to the basement. For the next three hours, in a dark room lit only by the glow of his Dell laptop, he clicked from one medical website to another. The more he read, the more concerned he became. Polymyositis is a rare disorder that makes the immune system attack the body rather than protect it. Doctors don't know what causes it or how to cure it. Its severity is measured by the amount of an enzyme, creatine phosphokinase (CPK), in the blood. In healthy adults the normal CPK count ranges from 22 to 198 units per liter. Powell's was nearly 27,000.

Reading on, Powell learned that the disease drains victims of their strength, leaving some in wheelchairs and at risk of complications involving the lungs and heart. Ricky Bell, the first pick in the 1977 NFL draft, died at 29 of heart failure caused by a similar condition, dermatomyositis, so weak at the end that he could barely lift his three-year-old daughter.

An hour after Powell went downstairs, Hess walked down to check on him. A trim blonde attorney who graduated near the top of her undergraduate and law school classes at the University of Chicago, Hess is tough and smart. The pair had known each other in high school—during what Hess calls Powell's "meathead phase"—but hadn't started dating until their mid-20s. Powell couldn't let her see him so vulnerable. "I need you to go back upstairs," he snapped at her.

Powell then clicked through case studies on the Myositis Association web page. By the end of the night he'd looked at more than 120. He couldn't find a single case in which a patient with a CPK count above 20,000 lived longer than a year after diagnosis.

Powell curled up, hands cradling his head, and cried so hard that he couldn't breathe.

**Wrestling is** a sport rooted in desire. It helps to be strong and quick, but stamina and endurance matter just as much, if not more. The novelist John Irving fell in love with wrestling during high school, in part because his first coach, Ted Seabrooke, told him, "Talent is overrated. That you're not very talented needn't be the end of it."

To be a wrestler is to spend untold hours in nearly unbearable pain, to consider it a badge of honor to be slammed onto a four-inch mat so often that the blood vessels in your ear explode and the cartilage rumples until it looks like a giant piece of flesh-colored gum. Wrestlers can acquire staph infections or herpes. Some suffer knee and shoulder injuries that leave them hobbled, unable to play tennis or basketball in their 30s. They're encouraged to imagine terrible scenarios—*Your mother's head is under a guillotine, and you must save her*—to engage their primal survival instincts and break free of holds. There is a reason Dan Gable, who won a gold medal at the 1972 Olympics and is considered the greatest U.S. wrestler ever, said, "Once you've wrestled, everything else in life is easy."

Some might wonder why a man would subject himself to such a sport. There is little money in it and only a slight chance of a decent-paying career beyond a few plum college coaching jobs or a switch to mixed martial arts. Yet wrestling's allure is strong. It instills discipline, tests a man's limits. As Gable put it, "More enduringly than any other sport, wrestling teaches self-control and pride. Some have wrestled without great skill—none have wrestled without pride."

Powell was five when his father first took him to the wrestling room of the Oak Park Huskies, a youth club. If it bothered Bud Powell that Mike was at least five years younger than any other boy in the room, he didn't show it. Bud had grown up a hard city kid, the son of a Ukrainian bar owner. He believed that men needed to be tough and that toughness was acquired early. So when Mike got out of line, Bud pulled off his belt or used an open palm. He installed a pull-up bar in the backyard and offered Mike a dime for every one he completed. Then, when Mike tried to collect, Bud said, "You don't want to be the best on your own? You need to get paid for it?"

Fred Arkin, the Huskies' coach at the time, took one look at the small, brown-haired boy and told Bud to take him back. He's way too young, Arkin said. But Bud would have none of it.

The first day was rough. Mike hid in a bathroom stall so that no one would see him cry. It would be the last time he ever felt scared in a wrestling room. Within a month he'd learned technique. By the time he was in the second grade he'd become a demon on the mat—low to the ground, aggressive and indomitable.

That year Arkin decided Mike was ready. During a junior-high-level tournament Arkin approached Mike and his father. We don't have anyone to wrestle the 65-pound class, he said to Bud. Would you let Mike? Bud looked at his son, who was seven years old and about 50 pounds, and knew the answer. Mike won his first match. Then he won again. In the final he faced off against an eighth-grader. It took Mike all of 30 seconds to pin him.

Mike grew into a dominant junior high wrestler, then a dominant high school wrestler. He won the Class 2A 171-pound state championship at OPRF in 1994 and was an All-America at Indiana in '96. After graduating, he was good enough to qualify for the Olympic trials in 2000 but broke a wrist in a bicycling accident. Already bone-on-bone in both knees due to six surgeries caused by wrestling and football injuries—he was a high school linebacker, fullback and placekicker—he decided it was time to stop competing.

That fall Powell returned to his old high school as an assistant coach and assistant special-ed teacher. In 2003 he was elevated to head coach. At first he was all enthusiasm and no strategy, creating practice routines by trial and error. Still, he had a gift. He could see a wrestling move once and imitate it perfectly, then teach it to the kids. So he read books, attended clinics and quizzed other coaches.

The team he inherited was short on talent—a chronic problem at OPRF, which now competes in Class 3A, the largest in Illinois. Powell didn't need stars, though, just kids who were willing to try. So he walked the halls of the school, keeping an eye out for boys who looked lost. He approached football players and asked if they wanted to be part of the hardest-working team in the school.

During the day he taught in the emotional-adjustment classroom. Here were some of the roughest kids from Chicago's West Side—boys who'd been kicked out of OPRF's behavior-disorder program, who were from gang-affiliated families or had been shunted from one foster home to the next. For most, just being at school was a victory. Powell was supposed to teach them math and science, but instead he held classes in manhood. He talked about what it means to be a father and about the toll of absentee dads. He also taught a lesson on African-American culture, from W.C. Handy to Eazy-E and Wu-Tang Clan. He had the kids write their own eulogies, then asked them to describe their mothers at their funerals. He had them do push-ups in class, took them on field trips, walked the whole class to his house so students could take his two dogs for a walk—the type of mundane suburban activity the boys rarely experienced. *Are you crazy,* other teachers said, *taking a bunch of gangbangers to your house?* But nothing bad ever came of it. Powell's goal, as he told his friends, was "for each boy to say that for the first time in my academic career I had someone who really loved me."

Over the years Powell persuaded a handful of the EAC boys to wrestle. They joined other kids on the team who had learning disabilities or developmental issues. Some came from terrible backgrounds. Some had parents who were substance abusers. One was repeatedly abused by a parent when he was five years old; another had been forced to watch as his father, a notorious West Side gangster, abused his mother. By 2009 several were starters on a state championship team. Others never won a match, but that wasn't the point. They stayed in school; they graduated.

The boys listened to Powell because he spoke their language, swearing and telling bad jokes and revealing his own scars and failures: how his parents' divorce when he was 17 had been rough on him; how bad grades had disqualified him from the state wrestling tournament in his junior year; how he'd been selfish in college, gotten in those stupid frat fights and gone out drinking beer and smoking pot instead of training, which led to the injuries that derailed his career. *I peaked as a freshman in college,* he told them. *I don't want that to happen to you.*

Of course he also talked about his triumphs. How at the start of his senior year at OPRF he gave up everything that seemed most important at the time—his girlfriend, parties, hanging with his buddies—and focused solely on his goal of becoming a state champion. How when he did it, dominating the title match, he was so elated that his coach had to pull him off the mat so he'd stop celebrating. How he became more curious about the world as he got older, reading *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman and listening to blues singer Robert Johnson and NPR and eventually becoming a vegetarian. ("A meathead vegetarian—ironic, huh?" he joked.) How when a former girlfriend called him a narcissist he dismissed it, then later decided she was right and he needed to change. How he got a graduate degree in special ed and took a job as a teacher's aide and an assistant coach for about $17,000 a year because he felt he was doing something important.

With Powell at the helm the Huskies went from unranked to a state power within five years. In 2006 they qualified for the state team dual meet for only the second time in their 52-year history. The following season OPRF went 17--3 and had eight state tournament qualifiers. Then, in '09, it all came together. The state title was OPRF's first in any team sport in four years.

Powell had achieved his coaching goal, but now, with polymyositis, he faced a different kind of challenge. After that first horrible night in the basement he awoke angry at himself. For years he'd been telling boys to shun excuses, to avoid self-pity. He'd talked to them about being unbreakable, about persevering, but he'd never faced real hardship. What kind of example would he set if he gave up now?

The next afternoon Powell gathered his team after practice. "You guys have probably noticed that there's something wrong with me," he said. "I'm really sick, and I'm not going to look very good for a while, but here's what I want you to know: I'm going to be a badass, and I'm going to beat this. Everything I've taught you is real. My recovery starts now."

A few days later Powell sent an e-mail to the OPRF wrestling Listserv, which included alumni, friends, relatives and students:

*I have been diagnosed with polymyositis.... I have the strength in my major muscles of a small child and I fatigue with very little exertion. I am on severe doses of Prednisone and am showing progress. It will be many months before my strength is back.... I'm hoping for remission status. Either way, this really sucks. For a guy whose entire, apparently fragile, persona is predicated upon physicality and activity, it is particularly hard to swallow....*

*Obviously my biggest concern is that I will not have the energy to keep the wrestling program going the way we are accustomed. So any and all help is welcome. I am being told not to push myself, which goes against everything I stand for, but I am abiding nonetheless. Thanks for your well wishes. And keep in mind, I'm no punk. My spirit is strong.*

*In relentless pursuit,*

*Michael Powell*

**The first** e-mail replies arrived within minutes. They would be followed, in the days to come, by a flood of phone calls, letters and visits. Powell heard from old teammates, college coaches, former and current wrestlers and their parents. "I know that you have the will to get past this sickness," wrote Jonah Galaz-Englebert, a 2006 OPRF graduate. "No other outcome is possible because you are far too strong and great of a human being to not triumph over this, and too many people need you."

Another former wrestler, Peter Lovaas, wrote, "I just want you to know that you have changed my life for the better, and ... maybe one day I will be able to do for someone what you have done for me."

The response buoyed Powell. Yet when parents asked if they could hire him a dog walker or get his meals delivered or pitch in for a housekeeper, Powell said no. When Fred Arkin, whom Powell had coaxed out of retirement to be his freshman coach, tried to relieve him of the more tedious duties—the paperwork and phone calls—Powell refused. This is the stuff that keeps me going, he said. But what he meant was: *I'm going to beat this thing by myself.*

He came up with a motto: Winning. He talked about trying to "win every day." He read self-help books. He swallowed 28 pills a day, cycling through the medications that would sustain him over the following months: Prograf, methotrexate, an immunoglobin called IVIG, a B-cell blocker called Rituxan. He created the ultimate anti-inflammatory diet. Breakfast became egg whites with tons of garlic, served with spinach salsa and avocado; dinner was kale and grass-fed beef. He cut out salt, drank gallons of green tea. He bought an organic 70% cacao bar and promised himself he could eat the first half when his CPK got down to 5,000 and the rest when it dropped to 2,500.

And yet his body didn't respond. For Powell, a CPK of 200 feels like having just finished a three-mile run; 600 is like walking around with a bad flu. Powell's remained in five figures. In the first month he lost 40 pounds. His collarbone jutted out, his skin yellowed from the meds. He couldn't hold a push-up position, let alone do a push-up, and needed a cane to walk (though, true to form, he used a sword cane). He couldn't walk his dogs across the street without fearing that his bowels would betray him. Sammy Brooks went with him to Costco to push his cart. Junior wrestler Sam Koenigsberg had to help Powell up and down the stairs.

No matter how bad it got, though, Powell never missed a wrestling practice. He might need to stay seated, he might fall down in front of the boys, but he was not going to stop coaching. At one clinic he felt so weak that he pulled aside the Dardanes twins and Brooks and told them to call an ambulance if he collapsed.

In May 2009, Powell was called to the dais at the Illinois wrestlers' and officials' banquet to receive the award for Class 3A coach of the year. He struggled to get up, then hobbled to the stage on his cane "looking like a 94-year-old man," as Arkin remembers it. Coaches from around the state watched, stunned. Was that spindly figure really the same Mike Powell they'd seen roaring and hopping around six weeks earlier?

Then, one afternoon in early July, Powell felt a tiny bit better. His CPK numbers, which had been slowly dropping due to the medications, began to plummet. That's when he knew: He was going to beat polymyositis. It was happening too. By August, when Mike and Elizabeth got married, his CPK was down to 210. In October it dipped under 200. He felt and looked almost normal. By mid-October he was able to do seven pull-ups, 17 dips and 24 push-ups, numbers he tracked obsessively. He set a goal of winning a practice match by Christmas against Brooks, now a star sophomore drawing interest from top colleges. He began demonstrating technique again, doing light cardio and going through drills. His wife, friends and family counseled him to slow down. Are you doing too much with wrestling? they asked. Of course not, he said. *Wrestling is what's curing me.*

**The week** before Thanksgiving the letter arrived from the doctor's office. Powell stared at the number, sure it was a mistake. Four hundred eighteen? Maybe it's the flu, he thought. The following week he drove to the clinic in Oak Park to have blood drawn. This time his CPK was 500.

It only got worse. By the end of the year Powell's CPK was back up to 1,000. In March the Huskies completed a triumphant season, once again finishing with the most points at the state individual tournament and making the elite eight of the team tournament. Two months later Powell's CPK was up to 6,800, and he could barely get out of bed in the morning. He sank into depression. He'd done his part. He'd researched and *kicked polymyositis's ass.* He was supposed to be healed, triumphant, on to the next chapter of his life.

He went to San Diego for a wrestling camp and realized he couldn't even demonstrate technique. He saw how the kids looked at him, with pity. Even worse was other people's reactions. "You don't look sick," they said, and that was the thing: *He didn't.* He was no longer muscle-bound, but neither was he emaciated. He looked like anyone else. Yet even on his best days he never felt as good as a regular person does on his worst. Everything was an impediment: a flight of stairs, taking out the trash, a routine train ride. He tried to explain it: *Think about the sickest you've ever been. Now imagine that's how you feel every day.*

It did no good. Just as only other wrestlers understand what it means to be on that mat, only other polymyositis sufferers comprehended what Powell was going through. He understood why so many sufferers retreated to their homes to live out their days.

"Every challenge in his life, he'd just worked really hard," says Ryan Casey, who wrestled with Powell at Indiana. "This was the first thing he couldn't outwork."

One thing Powell knew was that he couldn't face more of the prednisone, the corticosteroid he'd taken soon after his diagnosis; it caused him to gain weight and made his face break out so badly that he couldn't bear to look at his wedding photos. But the physical change had been nothing compared to the paranoia and rage the drug had caused. One day Powell had hunched in the aisle of a Whole Foods, sure an 80-year-old man planned to attack him. Another time he became convinced his wife was cheating on him. He roared at her, said things he could never take back.

During those terrible early days he'd told Elizabeth, "If you want out, I'll never judge you. I'll never speak to one person about what it was. I'll tell your parents that I broke up with you. If you don't want to marry me, I understand." She looked at him and frowned. "Shut up," she said. "Don't ever say that to me again."

Now he wondered, though. As he saw it, the Mike Powell his wife fell in love with was gone, replaced by a sad, tired man. One night in the summer of 2010 he sat on his couch and thought about killing himself. It would free Elizabeth from what lay ahead, free him from living this way, from feeling so lonely. He'd always assumed he was different from the others who suffered from polymyositis, that his energy and strength would win out, that he wouldn't be one of those who withered away, forever too tired to put up a fight.

He was supposed to be preparing to become the world's greatest dad, was supposed to be hitting his prime as a coach. What if he lived another 20 years and never again felt alive? How could he show the boys what it means to be strong? There would be, he decided, relief in a quick death.

**What does** it mean to be a man?

It is a clear, cool afternoon a year later, in the fall of 2011. Students hurry through the halls of OPRF, laughing and posturing. In the Field House, a stream of wiry boys ascend the steep stairs to the wrestling room.

The room is cramped, with low ceilings and padded walls, and the disinfectant sprayed on the mats makes it smell like a mix of dirty socks and ammonia. Small windows let in orange spikes of late afternoon sun, but the dominant light comes from the rows of fluorescent bulbs overhead. A boom box on the windowsill blares out *Little Lion Man,* by Mumford & Sons: *Weep for yourself, my man/You'll never be what is in your heart/Weep Little Lion Man/You're not as brave as you were at the start.*

Within minutes the room is alive with activity. Young men in singlets run in circles, then cycle through various warmup moves: cherry pickers, frog jumps, dive rolls, front handsprings and dynamic stretches. They begin grappling in pairs, oddly silent given their level of exertion. The sound is of hard footfalls and the *whap-whap* of backs smacking the mats. Against one wall sits a blue box the size of a small suitcase. No wrestler is allowed to sit on it. It is Coach's box.

On the far side of the room a skinny man with short brown hair leans down, hands on knees. He is wearing khaki jeans, a blue cap, a T-shirt and small round glasses. He moves slowly, each action considered. Those who knew him five years ago might not recognize him. At least not until he opens his mouth. Mike Powell's voice remains large and raspy. It still carries the weight of the body that used to be attached to it.

It has been a rough year and a half for Powell. After reaching his nadir that night on the couch, he realized he could no longer live his life at full bore. He needed to accept that he'd never again be the most powerful man in the room; he needed to redefine what it meant to be a man. So he made concessions. Last May he gave up teaching. At the end of the school year he gave an impassioned going-away speech to the OPRF faculty. By the end of it the entire room was crying.

These days Powell's CPK hovers around 800. He cannot exercise, unless you count walks with his dogs, so his victories are different. "I'm undefeated in the steam room," he says, smiling but serious. "No one outlasts me."

Powell tries to rest as much as he can and not dwell on what-ifs, but it is hard. "One of my regrets is that I was just on the verge of actually doing something, of becoming the man I believed I could become," he says. "I don't know that there was a happier or more grateful 33-year-old man on earth. I don't care about these guys who are making a million by the time they're 25. That's not what I wanted to do. My goal was to win the state championship and do it the right way: with hard work and humble men who learn the great gifts of wrestling, and love from people who are not their relatives and who understand what it means to give yourself over wholly to someone or something." He pauses. "Wrestling teaches these really powerful lessons about delayed gratification, and I was finally giving [the boys] that. I was finally harvesting it in myself. I'm probably a better coach in some ways [now], but there's no way to replicate that spirit."

His practices are different these days. He sits down often, takes breaks. Every once in a while he'll show off and leap over the hurdles the wrestlers use to work on their explosiveness, even though he knows that later he'll pay the price for the exertion.

Now he slowly circles the room, watching as the wrestlers work on moves in pairs. "That's a macho finish—that's how you finish!" he shouts as a skinny freshman drops an upperclassman. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he catches junior Ben Sisler pile-driving a sophomore into the mat. "Ben, that's an all-state takedown. You need about two more and you're money!" More than ever, Powell tries to drive home his lessons. "You are who you are," he tells his team, "whether you're standing in a singlet or in a suit at a meeting.

"You can be a macho man and love your wife. You can be a macho man and be sensitive."

He tells his wrestlers that he loves them, and then, when they blush, he says there's no shame in expressing affection. "You don't have to say it back," he says. "Just know it's O.K. to say it."

Often he worries that he is less effective as a coach. Others disagree. "He's 10 times the coach he was," says Brooks. "He's smarter, and he prepares better. I grew up wanting to be just like him, and I still do." Mike Boyd, a former Illinois state champion, joined Powell as an assistant this season and is amazed. "I've learned more in a month and a half than in the last 10 years," Boyd says.

The team is good this year, once again capable of winning a state title. By Christmas the Huskies will be undefeated; by January there will be talk of an outside shot at the mythical high school wrestling national championship. But for now, in the fall of 2011, Powell focuses on how proud he is of the team's makeup. Of his 14 starting wrestlers, several were once special-ed kids, including Darius Henry, who wrestles at 113 and 120 pounds. Before coming to Oak Park, Darius had spent his life in and out of foster homes and had never wrestled. As a sophomore he finished with a 3.5 GPA and won his age group's national wrestling championship. If he continues on this pace, he will earn a college scholarship.

Powell's success stories are everywhere. Sammy Brooks just signed with Iowa, one of the top programs in the country. His brother Ben, class of '09, wrestled for a year at North Carolina. Two OPRF grads are living at the Olympic Development Center in Colorado Springs: Ellis Coleman, who is on track to wrestle at the London Olympics, and Peter Kowalczuk. Coleman became a wrestling phenomenon after devising a move called the Flying Squirrel that looks like something out of a kung fu movie. From a standing position he leaps over his opponent's head and, on the way down, grasps the other boy's waist or legs and flips him into a takedown. (YouTube it.) To this day Coleman calls Powell his "second father."

There are other types of success stories too. There is the boy from a gang-affiliated family who graduated from college and now writes Powell letters in which he addresses the coach as Dad. There are seven other boys who call Powell every year on Father's Day. There is the girl, Nicole Valentini, whom Powell welcomed to the team and who won only two matches but credits wrestling with giving her the confidence to succeed in life. There is the young banker who remains so proud of his crushed ears that when his mother worried what girls would think of them, he said, "Mom, I would never be with a woman who was that shallow."

That mother, Michele Weldon, continues to be amazed by Powell. She recently wrote a memoir about her fight with cancer and ended up including chapters on him. At wrestling tournaments, she says, the other mothers "all talk about Coach Powell and what he has done for their sons as people and how he developed their sense of integrity and discipline. It's something I'm so profoundly grateful for because I cannot begin to offer that in a way that they can begin to hear it."

The fathers feel the same way. Kevin O'Mara is a superintendent at a nearby high school, and his son, Jake, an OPRF junior, is a state-ranked wrestler. Twice O'Mara has dropped off personal checks to support the OPRF program. "Look, I don't care about wrestling," O'Mara says while watching practice, "but I care about my son being a good young man, and Powell does that for him."

**John Irving** wrote that "wrestling is not about knocking a man down—it's about controlling him." That's what Powell strives for now: control. He no longer dreams of hiking the Appalachian Trail or going on a surfing trip to Hawaii. Instead he meets old friends at the diner for breakfast. He does breathing and energy exercises. He recites *Invictus* five times a week in the sauna, lingering on the final lines: *It matters not how strait the gate,/How charged with punishments the scroll,/I am the master of my fate:/I am the captain of my soul.*

He has become painfully realistic. He knows he's twice as likely as a normal person to get cancer, that if he ever has esophageal problems it's likely a death sentence. He's 35 and could live another five years or 15 or 40. He has no idea. He'd trade the uncertainty for 10 good years.

Powell reads stories about people who go out in a blaze of glory, living their final days to the fullest. He reads stories about people who make miraculous comebacks. These are the stories that get made into movies, that inspire others. He understands that people do not want to read about the grim daily battle to survive. It's why so many other polymyositis sufferers give up and waste away.

So every morning Powell's body tells him to stay in bed, and every morning he fights it. Instead he takes 10 pills a day, eats anti-inflammatory foods, rewards himself with the occasional apple for a sugar rush and focuses on attainable goals. "My life has become relatively small," he says. "I coach wrestling and love my wife." He pauses. "I don't have much hope of being in remission for 20 years, but there's not a day that I'm not up for the fight."

These days Powell can barely complete five push-ups. If he makes it through a quarter-mile walk, he is pleased. Last week he completed two pull-ups.

He is, his wrestlers will tell you, the strongest man they know.