

Fight doesn't end for Ian Rice after injury ends wrestling career

by Ben Schorzman

The sign on the side of the school read "Home wrestling meet. Rice versus Gwin – rematch of the decade." Those two sentences were enough to send excited shivers of anticipation down the spines of the Vernonia inhabitants, and a look inside the high school gym that night proved that wrestling reigned in the small logging town. The worn, wooden bleachers in the matchbook size gymnasium were creaking under the weight of a capacity crowd, and the windows above the two exit doors were fogged in from the warm bodies that were crowding around a square, blue and yellow wrestling mat.

On the mat, two muscle-bound athletes circled each other, oblivious to the deafening roar of the crowd. The home-town hero, 18 year-old Travis Gwin, stalked around the circle, all 5'9" of him focused on his opponent. He was dressed in a black wrestling singlet that was barely covering his well-toned physique, and his dirty-blond hair curled over his headgear. Facing Gwin was Ian Rice from Clatskanie, a rival school in Vernonia's league. Rice stood an impressive 6'2" and his red singlet stretched even tighter across his broad shoulders. These two had met before, the previous year in the district tournament, with seeding in the state wrestling championships at stake. That time, Gwin won in three rounds, and it left Rice feeling empty. Gwin went on to win state that year, and even though Ian placed third, the memory of that defeat to a rival haunted him through the summer. That's why this match was so important. Two of the best wrestlers in the state were squaring off for league, state, and personal superiority.

The rematch was everything everyone hoped it would be – close, well wrestled, and electric. Both Gwin and Rice wrestled beautifully, and Rice won the match 5-3, holding back Gwin's charge late in the third round. Rice was so excited by the win that he threw his headgear up so high that it hit the gym ceiling. He pumped his fists and yelled at the top of his lungs as the Clatskanie fans rushed the mat, pushing

through the downtrodden Vernonia fans. But for all of the hype and talk of animosity, Gwin and Rice showed nothing but class. Two giants in the world of high school wrestling – respected by their fellow students, opponents, and communities – hugged in the center of the mat and exchanged friendly words.

Flash ahead three years, and the older, bigger Ian Rice comes into focus. Wrestling is no longer a part of his life, and the yells of his hometown fans echo off of an empty gym's walls. The decision to cut wrestling out of his life wasn't a choice Ian made willingly. It was punched out of him. On February 17, 2005, in the winter of his freshman year, Ian was halfway through his red-shirt season as a member of the University of Oregon Wrestling team. In practice that day, the team was working on live matches. Teammates of similar weights would square off for rounds of three minutes, and then switch partners. In the heavyweight class, where Rice fit in at 218 pounds, there were only two guys, so Ian and his partner practiced against each other the entire time. His partner, a senior member on the team who will remain nameless, didn't take too kindly to underclassmen getting the upper hand, so when Ian hit three double-leg moves on him in a row, he snapped. "As I was crawling up his legs, getting ready to pin him, he came up and punched me in the temple." Rice recounts. "That right there was enough to piss me off, but I didn't really know the extent of my injuries."

In fact, it was weeks later before Ian got a correct diagnosis. At first doctors had told him it was a neck injury, but after he struggled through two more

weeks of classes, headaches, and short-term memory loss, Ian went back in. This time doctors did a MRI, and they found what they had missed the first time – evidence of a severe concussion. "They told me I had to quit wrestling, and that I could never do any contact sport again," Rice says. "It turned my world upside down." For Ian, who had wrestled his entire life, being told to quit was hard to take. "It wasn't easy. I was good at wrestling, and stopping so suddenly really got to me. I was sort of depressed, and I kept on wondering what I was going to do with my life." The scenario Ian found himself in was one that many athletes have nightmares over. What do you do when you have to quit playing the sport you love? In his case, Ian had to rethink his entire life.

Besides the depression, Ian fought multiple physical consequences that were caused from the roundhouse punch to the head. Blurred vision, constant headaches and short-term memory loss all forced him to withdraw from school, and because of how late the incident occurred in the term, Ian was forced to take an F in each of his classes.

Ian recalls an instance when his memory was so bad, he couldn't even remember having lunch with friends. Three weeks after the punch, he was going to meet with some friends at the food court in their dorm. They were five minutes late, and the next thing he could remember was the next day. Ian saw his friends and asked them why they didn't show. They looked puzzled, and said they all had lunch. "I was blown away," Ian said. "They told me that we had eaten, and afterwards, we talked for over an hour. I couldn't remember any-

thing we talked about."

When asked about the guy who punched him, Ian shows a level of maturity gained from his ordeal. "People said I could've sued him and the school, but I didn't want to wreck his life because he got frustrated and made a mistake. I don't know if you believe in karma, but things that go around come around. Being unreasonably upset over the punch would've gotten me nowhere, and in reality it would've probably made me even more depressed." The premature end of his wrestling career has helped Ian gain perspective on his life. Instead of working full-time after dropping out, he re-enrolled part-time at the University of Oregon last fall, and worked his way back into school. "Education is too important for me to give up," Ian said. "I want it that much more now because it was that close to being taken away from me."

Two years, fifteen MRIs, and countless rehab sessions later, Ian is recovering. His vision is still not what it used to be, and he still can't participate in contact sports, but he's on the right track. He lives in a two-story apartment with a roommate, and he holds a part-time job working for UPS during the week. He applied for the university's Lindquist School of Business and, starting this term, he's back to being a full-time student.

The topic of wrestling still hurts to talk about though, and one look around his living room gives no hint into his former passion. Ian has started anew, using the heartbreaking situation to refocus his life. Even though it's a sore subject for him, Ian would not be the person he is today without wrestling. The memories he has of the bitter cold nights spent grappling with opponents define part of him. And no matter how much it hurts him, to the people who were in Vernonia's gym that night, Ian will always be remembered as a wrestling star from Clatskanie, Oregon.

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