Going to the mat

With bulging muscles, a Roman nose and a tree-trunk neck, John Wechter, MD, looks like a potential Olympian.

In April, the soft-spoken 35-year-old orthopedic surgeon from Willmar nearly earned a trip to Rio de Janeiro this summer, placing fourth in his weight class at the U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling Trials in Iowa City.

A world-class athlete, Wechter is ranked third in the United States in the 98 kg (215 lbs.) weight class. In addition to qualifying for the Olympic trials this year, he also did so in 2004 and 2008 but didn’t make the teams. Then in 2009, he dislocated his shoulder so badly he was unable to wrestle for two and a half years. Wechter came back to win his weight class at the U.S. Nationals in 2013. That earned him first seed to represent the United States in the World Team Trials. But when he tore his adductor longus in the first round, it ended his bid.

By then Wechter had the wrestling world’s attention because he was able to accomplish all of this while working 80-hour weeks in residency, making it to only 10 percent of practices with the Minnesota Storm Wrestling Club in Minneapolis, while his opponents trained full time. In 2014, he took second at Nationals and became the U.S. World Team alternate.

Focus and determination have always been Wechter’s hallmarks, whether in the operating room or on the wrestling mat. At Saginaw High School in Michigan where he grew up, Wechter started wrestling “without much success,” he says. He continued with the sport at Michigan State University “where I improved, but still wasn’t happy with my performance.” (His obstetrician father had already inspired Wechter to become a doctor.) With encouragement from his friend, Ramin Mammadov, an international wrestling champion who came to Michigan State from Azerbaijan, Wechter switched to Greco-Roman style wrestling.

Unlike in high school and college wrestling, Greco-Roman wrestlers can’t use their legs to take down an opponent. Nor can they grab their opponent below the waist. That narrows the options for scoring
Wechter's training regimen is equal parts weight lifting, aerobic conditioning and wrestling. His coaches have described him as having "almost freak strength and power," but Wechter knows that's not enough. "Some guys make the Olympic team even though they aren't the strongest in their weight class," he says. “Technique is just as important.”

Wechter says he studies films of himself and his opponents. “It’s a very cerebral sport, where small changes make you better and technique trumps strength every time,” he says. “Speed and knowing when to make your next move are key. Some guys have only one or two good moves, but they’re champions because they’re really good at knowing when to make that move.”

Although he won’t be competing in Rio this summer, Wechter will be cheering on his teammates. And he’ll be doing it alongside his biggest fans: his wife, Katie, and their three children, ages 1, 3 and 8.

– HOWARD BELL

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