



Shaping Talent
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A MOST INFLUENTIAL LIFE

COLUMBUS, OHIO – Tom Ryan is the highly successful wrestling coach at Ohio State University. In 2015, his team even won with the program’s first-ever national championship.

Before that he was an assistant at Hofstra and Indiana universities. And before that he had a storied wrestling career at the University of Iowa.

With all his awards and accolades, it’s easy to see success has been the hallmark of his career. But that doesn’t even come close to telling the real story. Of his life. Or his career.

While he was coaching at Hofstra, his son, Teague, was playing hide-and-seek around the house with his mother. Suddenly, his heart stopped. Ryan administered CPR while his wife screamed over the phone for paramedics to hurry.

Tragically, Teague was pronounced dead within minutes. It was February 16, 2004. He was only 5 years old.

“There was no warning whatsoever,” Ryan said. “He was healthy. Life was great.”

Teague, in fact, had a physical exam just three weeks earlier and was declared healthy. But it was later determined an infection in his body months earlier had apparently spread to his heart.

For Tom Ryan and his wife Lynette, and their other children, life was forever changed.

“When we returned home from the hospital, our three other children were waiting for us at the door,” Ryan recalled, painfully. “The question was, ‘Where is he? Where’s Teague?’ That’s what an 11, a 9-year-old and a 4-year-old ask. But the pathetic answer was, I didn’t know where he was. I just knew I didn’t like the way we were feeling.”

Ryan started to dig for an answer to their question. Was Teague in heaven? Or where? He looked into evolution, but he soon determined the answer wasn’t there. So he dug into the Bible – anything that might let him spend more time with his son.

“If he’s in heaven, I want to go to heaven,” he said. “I wanted to be with him, so even my initial move toward Christ was very selfish. It was very ‘me’ based.”

“So I looked into Jesus more,” he added. “And if I found the facts I needed, then I’d surrender.”

It was a painful search. It took time.

“It was the pain, the loss, that led me to quiet the world and pursue the possibilities of this life,” Ryan said. “I came to the point of what I call the two options. Option one is, there’s a God. Option two is, no God. So, for me, it was, ‘Is Jesus who He said He was? Or am I here by chance?’ The scales tipped toward Jesus, so I became a believer.”

“Once I got to know Him, what He stood for and what He taught,” Ryan added, “then I decided this was a God I want to follow.”

Tom Ryan, now 48, grew up in Wantagh, New York, too busy to pursue a relationship with Christ, by his own admission.

“We went to church every week,” he said, “but I didn’t really understand what a relationship was like.”

Still, he gives credit to his mother who, he said, “was the closest thing to God I’ve ever met.”

“I was raised everyone is equal,” he continued. “You don’t treat the janitor any different than you treat a professor. So I think, in general, I always had a lot of respect for people.”



“Now, I see every human being as a designed product, with a God that wants them to be the best version of themselves. I think that’s helped me a lot as a leader.”

As such, Ryan tries to coach by three principles of leadership.

“The first is example,” he said. “So if you’re going to coach you’d better lead by example. And if you fall, which I have, then you apologize. The second principle is embracing pain and suffering. And then truth and love is the third.”

“I really believe our team is where it is because of these principles,” he explained. “I believe Ohio State has become one of the premier wrestling teams because of these principles.”

He also believes practicing the right principles attracts the right recruits.

“A lot of the guys we’re getting now are guys who think this way and they’re pursuing that,” he said.

Still, as busy as he is, and with all his teams’ successes, Ryan said his son is never far from his thoughts. He readily admits he talks about Teague “a lot.”

“I want his life to have an impact on others,” he concluded. “He only lived 5 years, but it’s the most influential life mine has crossed.”

Shaping Talent focuses on the influences that lead athletes to succeed. The people who helped them. Their work ethic. How and why they turned something they like into something they do. In other words, how God shaped their growth. If you have a suggestion for a future profile, contact Rye D’Orazio at Central Ohio Fellowship of Christian Athletes at 614-682-6551 or email rdorazio@fca.org.