

The Toughest Challenge

By J.E. Solinski

ALAN STEPPED on the scales and anxiously watched the needle rise to 144 1/2. He smiled. He had made his weight with half a pound to spare. He watched as the official made a notation on his clipboard before stepping down.

“Next,” said the official methodically, and up stepped another wrestler. Alan pulled on his sweats and then joined his teammates grouped together by the locker-room door.

“No problem, eh Alan?” joked Richie, their heavyweight, who never had to worry about making weight. “Don’t see why you guys are always *sweating* over this.” The others laughed at his pun.

“Speaking of sweating,” said Mark, the senior 175 pounder, “has anyone seen John? He went out running an hour ago. Still had to drop three pounds.”

They all laughed. “Yeah, I saw him about fifteen minute ago,” Bob, a 119 sophomore answered. “He was still running.”

“Well, he’d better hurry up,” Jim insisted. “He only has a couple of more minutes to weigh in, and Coach will be pretty ticked if he’s disqualified from the sectionals.”

“There he is,” yelled Gary, the 98 pounder, spotting John at the end of the line. The group moved toward the scales. They watched as wrestler after wrestler stepped on and off the scales. Finally, it was John’s turn. The team held its collective breath as he stepped up. The needle fluctuated dramatically, and the official moved in closer to take a better reading. So did the team.

“One hundred sixty-five,” barked the official and then under his breath muttered, “barely.”

The team let out a cheer and John breathed a sigh of relief and then, smiling, joined them.

“Wasn’t worried a bit,” he said nonchalantly, then rolled his eyes and feigned passing out.

Everyone laughed, then Richie addressed the group. “Well, troops, are we still on for tonight?”

A collective, “Yeah!” with raised fists was the reply. Alan looked somewhat puzzled.

“What’s tonight?” he asked.

“Say, that’s right,” said Richie. “You’re our new boy, aren’t you? Keep forgetting this is your first year on the team. Well then, let me tell ya,” Richie continued, placing his huge hand on Alan’s shoulder in a brotherly fashion.

“Every year after we win the league championship—*like* we did again this year. . .” he paused looking expectantly about the group.

They answered with a hearty, “Yeah!”

“We get together on the eve of the sectional title to bond as a team. Tonight it’s at my place. You get there about seven, then we have a few munchies, watch a couple of adrenaline boosting movies like *Rocky I, II, III, or IV*, to pump us up for tomorrow, and

then we go home. It's a great time." He gave Alan an affectionate pat. "So how 'bout it? You'll be there, won't ya?"

Alan felt a warm glow course through his body. This had been a great season for him personally, and he felt even better now knowing that all the guys accepted him.

"Sure," he said enthusiastically. "Does Coach come?"

A titter of laughter rippled through the group, eyes catching eyes. Alan wondered uncomfortably what he had said that was so funny. He looked at Mark. Mark's face had turned red, and he wasn't smiling. But before Alan had a chance to ask anything, Richie patted him on the back and continued.

"Naw, Coach likes us to take the leadership role every once in a while, and this is one of those times. So it's just us guys for tonight, OK?"

Alan glanced about the smiling group and relaxed, but he couldn't help noticing Mark looking away. He wondered what was wrong with him.

"OK," he answered, and the group broke up. Alan saw Mark leaving by the side door but didn't have a chance to question him before he was gone. Oh well, he'd follow up on it tonight.

Richie's house was only a couple of blocks from Alan, so he decided to walk. The night was clear and crisp giving Alan a fresh surge of energy. Everything was going great. By the time he arrived, most of the other guys were already there munching on the chips or sandwiches that Mrs. Martin, Richie's mom, had made. Alan followed Richie into the family room and looked around.

"Where are your folks?" he asked. His question caused a few team members to look his way, but Richie fielded the question flawlessly.

"Went to see my grandparents. Figured three plus hours of Sly Stallone and hyper guys might get on their nerves.

Alan grinned. They were probably right. Mark showed up soon after, but looked extremely uncomfortable and for some reason seemed to be avoiding Alan. When Alan finally did corner him, Mark had little to say.

"Are you OK?" Alan asked.

"Yeah. I'm fine," he answered. "Just a little tense about tomorrow." Then he walked away.

Strange, thought Alan. He had felt pretty close to Mark all season. Both were Christians and attended the same church. Mark, who had wrestled for three years, had shared with Alan how he had learned to use the wrestling mat as a place to demonstrate his Christian faith. There wasn't anyone Alan admired more than Mark, and his sudden aloofness bothered him. But he respected the guy's privacy and didn't push the issue. Instead, he gave a silent prayer. *Take care of him, Lord. Help him through what's bothering him, and use me in any way you can.*

At seven thirty, the first of two Rocky films went in. They guys clamored around the TV, parroting the lines and calling for "Aadrian." It was a great time of team oneness. Then between the first and second flick, Richie stood up and went to the kitchen, soon to return with a huge paper bag. Everyone sat smiling and looking at him expectantly.

“Now,” he said as dramatically as he could. “It is time to toast the greatest high school wrestling team in the state.”

“Oo-oo-oo-oo!” chanted the team, waving their fists.

“A toast!” Richie yelled as he reached into the bag and began tossing cans to each guy. Alan caught the one aimed at him but wasn’t sure if it was the coldness of the can or its contents that shot a sudden chill through his body. He looked at it cautiously and his mouth went dry. Then as tops popped and hoots went up around him, he looked up. He caught Mark eyeing him furtively, and when Mark saw the shock on Alan’s face, his lips tightened and he looked away sadly. Alan was in turmoil. This was illegal. Not only because they had signed a code of ethics, but because they they were under age. They could lose everything they had worked for.

His heart pounded. What should he do? As a Christian he knew he should stand up and do what was right, but he didn’t want to. They had finally accepted him. What would they think now? He licked his lips—his heart pounding in his ears. He felt his mouth moving, but his voice seemed miles away.

“I don’t think we should do this,” his voice cracked. A hush followed as 15 pairs of eyes settled on him. “What if we get caught?”

“Haven’t yet,” snickered Richie, grinning and taking a big swig. The others relaxed then, as they laughed and took swigs of their own.

Alan didn’t know what to do. He had no pull with this group. They would only laugh at him. He looked at Mark who was sitting mutely on the bar stool holding his open can of beer, and Alan’s ire rose. This was *his* fourth year. Had he been a part of this for the past three? This guy who claimed to wrestle for Christ on the mat wasn’t even willing to stand up for Him in someone’s family room. Mark should be taking the lead here, standing up for what was right. His anger grew as he rose slowly, trying to regain his composure. The others looked at him.

“Hey, new boy’s got a toast to make,” said John, and the others cheered.

Alan looked at them slowly, stopping at Mark. “No . . . no toast,” he said softly and looked back at the others. “I just stood up to say I’m leaving. Not only are we underage, but we specifically signed a code of ethics saying we were willing to demand and expect more of ourselves than others. I don’t know about you guys, but I take my oaths seriously.”

The place had grown deathly quiet. He continued. “This can’t help us a bit, only hurt us. I’m sorry, but I’ll have no part of it.” Then he turned to leave.

“Squeal and we’ll implicate you,” Richie said slowly, and Alan looked at him in disbelief.

“No, you won’t,” came a vice from a far bar stool, and Alan saw Mark stand up and lay his beer on the counter. “Cause I’ll vouch for him. Oh, you can say I was involved because for the three years I’ve compromised and drank with you. But Alan’s right. It’s wrong, and I’ve been a hypocrite. I’m leaving too.”

Alan looked at Mark gratefully, and his faltering admiration for the senior wrestler seemed to regain its footing. A few of the guys laid their beer cans down, and the raucous mood of the evening was dampened. But whether or not anyone else left, Alan and Mark didn’t know. They didn’t stay to watch. For them, the party was over.