

GOODLIFE



MAKING EVERY SECOND COUNT

BY JOHN ANDERSON  
Reporter

Aidan Ruddy had been in this position before in wrestling and in life. Behind. Losing. No hope. No chance ... and at the bottom.

Growing up in Breckenridge, nothing was handed to Ruddy. He earned a spot on the wrestling team and earned a chance to wrestle in college at Concordia College Moorhead.

But this time, for Aidan, being behind and at the bottom was literal.

Saturday, March 1, Ruddy found himself down by one with 10 seconds left and down on his hands and knees on the wrestling mat. He flirted with greatness and a trip to state at Breckenridge High School as a wrestler and as a senior with the BW Storm combined team.

When he got to college, his freshman year he went 4-10. He improved to 14-10 with four pins as a sophomore, but his junior year started with a 2-4 start. He lost his spot at 149 as two freshmen jumped ahead of him on the depth chart. His only chance to get mat time was to move up a weight class to 157.

So nobody expected March 1 to happen.

But there was Aidan, displaying his conditioning and elite wrestling skills at the Division III NCAA national qualifiers for the Concordia College Cobbers. He was down 6-5 to the No. 1 seed, Zach Sato of University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, a defending All-American with a 37-6 record and the No. 5-ranked wrestler in the nation. Aidan was 15-9 with a career mark of 33-29. Sato has 104 wins.

But like he always has, Aidan was working and fighting. Two more seconds tick away before the wrestlers stand up, shake hands and Ruddy's season ends as predicted. However, the referee noticed how hard Aidan was wrestling all match. With eight seconds left, the whistle blew and the call was made, "One point (for Ruddy) for stalling."

The match was tied. If Sato holds Ruddy for eight seconds, it's off to overtime and Sato has a chance to get the points needed to win.

It's amazing what goes through your mind as an athlete in a matter of seconds. In a blink of an eye, Aidan saw his mom, Carolyn Ruddy, dropping him off at the school for basketball practice in seventh grade. Aidan smiles inside. On that day, basketball practice was canceled. Aidan turned around but his mom was gone. She had to work to support raising three children and barely had time to get him to practice.

However, inside the gym was Breckenridge 5th to 8th grade activity night, and kids could try wrestling and play dodgeball. Aidan went for the dodgeball and stayed for the wrestling. By the end of practice, he had a new favorite sport.

That 7th grade year, his coaches, Tom Haire (now principal at St. Mary's School in Breckenridge) and Eric Erlandson (a current BW Storm assistant coach) taught him over and over again a basic move from the bottom in wrestling. Gain hand control as you are standing up, arch back, break the hands and get away from your opponent for a point.

Aidan's eyes opened back up. He had eight seconds. The whistle blew and Aidan started to get up, but Sato took him right back down.

Five seconds left.

Aidan could hear his coaches from high school in his head, "Hand control!" From a sitting position, he didn't panic and grabbed the hands of his opponent.

Four seconds.

Aidan incredibly shot up in the air to his feet.

Three seconds.

There was no time to arch his back, so he made the bold decision to turn into Sato and try a throw. Sato wisely countered by grabbing the leg to take Ruddy down and end it. But Ruddy's strength and balance was so great, he was able to get an arm under Sato, then pull his en-

tire body back and free. The two wrestlers were no longer one.

One second.

The referee signaled one point as the buzzer sounded.

The Concordia team and coaches went into a frenzy. Aidan started jumping up and down and all around. He won, 7-6 and was going to the NCAA Wrestling Championships in Rhode Island. There are 138 teams with wrestling in Division III programs and Aidan will attempt to go for a national championship or win enough matches to be on the podium and earn the title of NCAA All-American.

While Aidan may not have had resources growing up others did, he had support from the Breckenridge community, to his mom and now, his coaches at Concordia, it's all come full circle.

"I was raised by a single parent my whole life — my mom was raising three children and working her job," Aidan recalled. "You couldn't just eat out when you wanted. I worked as soon as I could, took any job I could that paid cash at age 14. I did anything I could, I even cleaned up old construction sites."

While his friends paid for their AAU or USA Wrestling cards and then had the money to enter and travel to tournaments, Aidan stayed home. But home is where his mom and the Haire family could help him the most.

"We didn't have the extra money, so I could only go to camps that Breckenridge held," Aidan said. "But I had support. Coaches found me wrestling shoes. They weren't new, they were hand me downs, but they were a help. Sometimes people would buy us dinner. Those same people from back home who helped me still text me, check on my brackets, send me encouraging texts. And they are only 45 minute away, so I can stay connected."

Aidan said the day basketball practice was canceled in 7th-grade was his lucky day. He said his win to get to the NCAA's was "an accomplishment I will look back to the rest of my life." But there was another chance encounter.

"Ryan Brandt is the head coach at BW Storm, the summer before my senior year, one is his friends, Graelin Garlington, came in for a camp and talked to me about wrestling at Concordia — I didn't even know Concordia had sports, I thought it was a music school so I wasn't even looking at it!" Aidan said. "Coach Garlington and I made an instant connection. He would come to tournaments at the high school level, he did private training. I would see him and we would talk and it turned out I liked him. He got me in contact with Quincy Osborn, the head coach." Osborn and three of his assistants are in Rhode Island all week and weekend with Aidan and Concordia's senior All-American Ty Bisek. After a practice from Rhode Island, Osborn talked to the Daily News about Aidan Ruddy.

"We recruited him and we look at intangibles. He was a great student and a great athlete — he was also being recruited for track and field. He had untapped potential in other sports," Osborn said. "But a 5th-place wrestler in the state of North Dakota gives you a chance to be on a college roster. The wrestling is good in the Midwest."

The story of Ruddy going up a weight class, working out, lifting and losing weight from hard work is a story itself this season. By the end of the year, he was wrestling so well, Osborn discussed things with Aidan and put him back in his original class for nationals. Aidan took advantage of the second chance, and Osborn said that defines him, taking advantage of chances.

"That community (Breckenridge and Wahpeton) did enough to get him to college and he's taken advantage of it," Osborn said. "He wants to be the greatest he can be, and he's going to graduate from college. He's a 3.6 student and he is a success story whether he gets to this tournament and becomes a NCAA All-American or not — he's a success story through and through."

The college and the Cobbers wrestling program has been a big part of that.

"We are well-supported and we have

good resources. We run a big wrestling event and we can support our team to travel throughout the season and bring a large staff to an event like this to nationals (the NCAA only pays for an athlete and a coach)," said Osborn. "I think the academics at Concordia are appealing. Institutionally, it's great. We are a lifestyle team. We are looking for guys who want to do the right thing. It's an exceptional experience, especially if someone cares about academics. We get a lot of talented kids who come to wrestle. They get a quality education and experience. It is a family environment and people are supported in their goals."

Aidan agrees.

"My college coaches have been amazing and supportive along the way," Aidan said. "I didn't have a great freshman year and they didn't give up on me. They were able to give me the energy I needed and I was able to turn things around. And off of the mat, they are awesome, these are guys I would invite to my wedding. One of our expectations as a team is to be more well-rounded, and that's how it is at Concordia, they care about more than wrestling."

He said his senior year in high school he enjoyed wrestling for Ryan Brandt on the combined Breckenridge-Wahpeton team as Brandt, "Was a good coach I was able to relate to. I have been fortunate to have pretty good coaches."

And teachers. His Dean's List marks are helping him earn a health and physical education degree.

"I was told by a few teachers I would be a good teacher, I was good with math and helped my classmates, but I have more of a passion for health and physical education," Ruddy said. "They made me realize I want to teach someday."

Osborn and Aidan talk about Aidan's strength and commitment to the weight room. Aidan reminisces about some of his epic come-from-behind matches in high school to go to the state tournament. And the fact he might be wrestling a 35-1 champion in his first match at nationals.

But the conversation once again comes back around to Carolyn Ruddy. She may not have been able to afford to send her kids to camps, but she isn't missing nationals.

"I can't wait, she should be here any minute," Aidan said from his hotel after a workout and lunch in Rhode Island. "She has been very supportive." He then laughs and says, "She sends me videos on Facebook of moves I can try!"

But he adds, "She took time to get off work and found the money to get to Rhode Island. She knows this is an accomplishment not everyone gets ... only seven percent of all wrestlers experience this."

Aidan doesn't take it for granted and has proven he makes every second count.

PHOTOS SUBMITTED

BELOW: Aidan Ruddy leaps into the arms of his coaches after a huge upset win that lifted him into nationals in Rhode Island. LEFT: Aidan Ruddy At Concordia College Moorton.



AIDAN RUDDY  
HAS EXCEEDED  
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THANKS TO HARD  
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BELIEVING IN HIM

ONE SHINING MOMENT: Aidan Ruddy celebrates an upset, last-second win over the No. 1 ranked NCAA All-American that sent him to the nationals this weekend in Rhode Island for the Concordia Cobbers wrestling team.



SUBMITTED

Aidan Ruddy competes in college.