

Ultimate fighter: Kyle Maynard

He's grappled with adversity all his life. But that didn't prevent him from posting 35 wins as a high school wrestler his senior year

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Kyle Maynard was born with a condition known as congenital amputation. After a successful high school career, he will wrestle for the University of Georgia next spring. Maynard is in Toronto to speak at a March of Dimes Canada dinner.

TORONTO - Sometimes, Cliff Ramos gets upset with the members of the Collins Hill High School wrestling team. His is an elite program, one of the top-ranked in the entire state of Georgia. And so when one of Ramos' athletes does not show up for practice ready to give everything he has, the coach gets a little hot.

Just the other day, for example, some kid was dogging it during training. He said his leg was feeling kind of sore and he could not reach that extra few inches to complete a move.

Ramos could have blasted the kid with a verbal barrage. He deserved it. But he bit his tongue instead, and simply gestured at the photo of Kyle Maynard that hangs on the wall of the wrestling room at Collins Hill.

"I have never heard Kyle give an excuse, in all the years I have known him, and he has more built-in excuses that he could give than any of us do," Ramos says.

Kyle Maynard came to within a single win of being named a high school All-American in his senior year at Collins Hill. As it was, he graduated as the 12th ranked 103-pounder in the nation. Maynard still wrestles, at the University of Georgia, although yesterday he was sitting

high above the streets of downtown Toronto sipping on an ice water in the Executive Lounge at the Hilton hotel.

Maynard unscrewed the cap from a water bottle and poured the liquid into a glass all by himself, which is just a little bit remarkable considering the 20-year-old hardly has any arms to speak of. Same for his legs.

Maynard was born with a condition known as congenital amputation. His arms end above where his elbows would otherwise be, and his legs are about three-quarters of a thigh long and finish in tiny malformed feet.

"I knew I was definitely different by the time I went in to kindergarten," Maynard, in Toronto to speak at a March of Dimes Canada dinner, says. "But I never believed that just because I looked different that I had to act different, or do anything different."

Maynard's dad, Scott, was a jock back in his day, and his mom, Anita, was trained to be a teacher. Kyle inherited his father's love of sports. From Anita, he got a tireless cheerleader who was always out meeting neighbours around the family home in Fort Wayne, Ind., and telling them that her son was a perfectly normal kid -- with some obvious physical differences. She would say, sure, her son would love to play goalie in the road hockey games and take part in whatever else the gang got up to, so Kyle enjoyed a perfectly happy and adjusted young life.

Scott's work as a software salesman took the Maynard clan from Indiana to Suwanee, Ga., when Kyle was around 10 years old. He joined a tackle football team there, and he even harboured dreams of playing nose tackle in the NFL until his peers all had growth spurts and Maynard realized that, at 103 pounds, he needed to chase success in another sport.

Wrestling was where he found it -- just not right away.

"I was here that night when Kyle came [in to the gym]," Ramos says. "And I thought, 'Man, the poor guy. He will never be able to wrestle -- and he really wants to -- but even if he does, he is never going to win a match.' "

Ramos' prediction was correct in the beginning. Maynard began wrestling at the start of Grade 6. By the middle of Grade 7, he was lugging around a 0-35 career record, and he was seriously thinking about quitting.

But Scott and Anita had a house rule Kyle and his three younger, full-limbed sisters had to live by: If you start a sport, you don't just quit in the middle of the year.

Maynard remembers winning his first match as though it were yesterday. It was at a youth tournament at Collins Hill. He was warming up when he noticed the boy he was going to wrestle looking over at him. He looked scared.

Seeing someone else's fear washed away Maynard's own anxieties over his losing streak, and he went out and won the match 15-0.

He won using a style no wrestler had ever seen before. Ramos and Kyle worked for hours inventing a technique that would work for an armless and legless wrestler.

Today, Kyle scrambles around the mat like a man-bear, and his signature move -- the one everybody was talking about in his senior year when he had 35 wins instead of 35 losses -- is known as The Jawbreaker.

Maynard's right arm, though rounded at the end, has a bony-sharpness to it, a point with which he can type 50 words a minute. During a grappling contest, if he gets that point around an opponent's jaw-line, you might as well call for an ambulance.

"I just try and detach [the jaw] from the head," Maynard says, smiling. "I can lift close to 400-pounds with the butterfly press, and that move is the same kind of motion."

He did not get to break out The Jawbreaker on too many occasions this past year. Maynard's after-school job is as a motivational speaker, and it takes him all around the globe -- and away from his classes.

He was considered a part-time student at Georgia in 2005 and is only back to full-time status now, and looking forward to wrestling for the spring.

In the meantime, Maynard has been working hard at a new athletic passion: Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

"It looks just like a wrestling match -- there are chokes and arm-bars -- but it is a little bit more malicious," Maynard says. "The cool thing about it is, in [traditional] wrestling guys would just try and stay away from me. They would push on my head, and they wouldn't come in and lock up.

"But in this you have to come in and try and grapple and get somebody to submit, and grappling is where my strength is."

Outside of the ring and away from the speaking circuit Maynard has written a book, *No Excuses*, which was a New York Times bestseller.

He has also finished shooting a pilot for a series of the same name. Maynard acts as the host, and he tells stories about other inspirational people.

Long term, he thinks about going to law school and, while single for the past two months -- and happily so -- he would like to meet the right girl somewhere down the road, fall in love, get married and have a family of his own.

"You need to have your eyes set on the horizon and on what you really want out of your life, and don't lose sight of that," Maynard says. "People everywhere, regardless of what it is, they tend to make excuses. And they make excuses about stupid small things, and those small things get in the way of the big picture.

"But you just have to believe. You have to give your dreams a chance."

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