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Red Bluff, CA

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Corning grad seeks Olympic glory

By PAUL GADBOIS/DN Sports Editor

Every kid has dreams, but only a few are born with the tenacity to follow through with them until the end.

For Christopher Baker, only a few steps remain in a 20-year journey toward his dream.

Baker, a 1995 graduate of Corning High School, will be wrestling in a regional Olympic qualifier this weekend in Battleground, Wash., for a chance to compete at the Olympic Trials for the 2004 summer games, which will be held in Athens, Greece.

Except for Baker, this weekend's qualifier isn't a chance at all. It is no lottery more like a doorway.

"This is the biggest tournament of my life," Baker said. "This has been my dream for the past 20 years."

One thing almost stood in his way, however, and ironically the same thing is what drives him to succeed.

At the age of 7, Baker was crossing a street in his hometown of Corning and hit by a drunk driver and pronounced dead at the scene.

Though he survived the accident, Baker suffered a severe concussion and was told by doctors at Enloe Hospital that he would never again be an athlete.

Since that day Baker has set out to prove those doctors and everyone else who did not believe in him dead wrong.

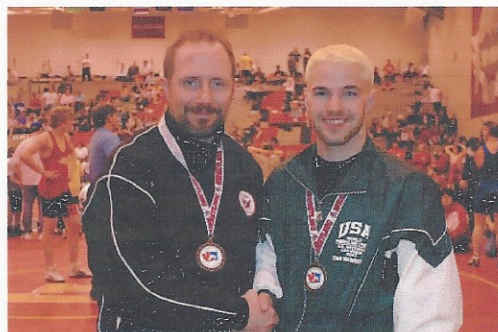
Baker rehabilitated by going back to his judo classes. He swam, he played tennis, he was a Corning Lion.

All have been steps taken toward the dream.

Baker went on to wrestle at Corning High, as well as earn the distinctive honor of Fighting Cardinal for the football team by a unanimous vote of his fellow grid-mates.

Baker defied every odd there was against him bet against every one of them and dumbfounded them all.

He also overcame a broken knee that he



Christopher Baker, a 1995 graduate of Corning High School (right), is pictured with coach and training partner George Dunn (left). Photo courtesy of George Dunn

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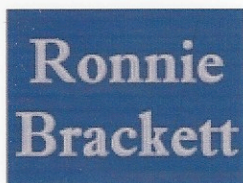
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suffered during a wrestling match in August 2002, and shed back down to his true weight from 185 to 121.

"I was Rudy before there was Rudy," Baker said, referring to a movie about an undersized football player that thrived with heart and determination.

Baker's background in judo helped shape his wrestling forte which is Greco-Roman style.

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Greco-Roman is a style in which only upper-body attacks may be used, while freestyle allows both upper- and lower-body attacks.

"Greco-Roman is similar to judo because there are a lot of throws involved and your center of gravity is very important," said Baker's training partner and coach, George Dunn.

Dunn is a Seattle native who won first place at 125 pounds in last year's Ironman World Championships. Baker placed fifth in the same event, and both earned spots on the All-World Team.

The pair have practiced together and trained each other for competitions since the Ironman.

"What's always impressed me about Chris is his incredible focus," Dunn said.

In addition to training for the pursuit of his dream, Baker also works full-time at Costco and volunteers as an assistant wrestling coach at Eastside Catholic High School.

Last weekend, Baker took first place in Billingham, Wash., in the 121s to qualify for this weekend's preliminary Olympic qualifier.

Considering what he has gone through to get where he is, the regional qualifier only seems like a formality less like a chance and more like a symbol of inevitability to reach the Olympic Trials.

"This is a dream I've had my whole life," Baker said.


"This is the reason why I try so hard because when I was knee-high to a grasshopper people told me I couldn't do it."

Rudy got into Notre Dame didn't he? The little engine made it up the hill didn't it?

Now it's Baker's turn to prove to everyone that he can, and achieve what began a generation ago as a little boy's dream.

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