Isaiah Bird: A Wrestler with No Legs and No Excuses

It’s the middle of another school day. Isaiah Bird sits among his second-grade peers at Lido Elementary School. His smile is bubbly, and his disposition is infectious. He leans over to talk to the man next to him. Miguel Rodriguez, a person who has more roles in Isaiah’s life than one could ever imagine, listens intently to the classroom lesson, persuading Isaiah to do the same. Isaiah rests his hand on Rodriguez’s head and whispers in his ear “I’m always going to get first place.” Rodriguez strikes a quick smile, directing him back to the teacher’s words. After staring down the speaker for a few seconds, Isaiah can’t help but turn back to talk with his classroom aid, wrestling coach and father figure. He approaches Rodriguez’s ear again and utters, “I like first place.”

For the average person, everyday life develops its own sense of normalcy. We walk, talk, and function as if the simple things in life are guaranteed. Isaiah, on the other hand, has fought enough battles at the age of seven to make each day a struggle. He suffered from a birth defect, causing him to be born without legs. To boot, he has been raised in a domestic context that one would not wish upon their worst enemy. His father has spent significant time in prison, and his parents have previous domestic violence charges against each other. He lives in a homeless shelter in a church in Glen Cove, NY, with his mother and younger brother. But through Rodriguez’s generosity and care, Isaiah has found an outlet in which he can succeed, and a home in which he is cared for.

“When the wrestling season, (Isaiah) stays with me five to six days a week,” Rodriguez told ESPN reporters as they produced a SportsCenter feature titled “No Excuses,” documenting Isaiah’s life and perseverance. (Visit http://espn.go.com/video/clip?id=12893699 to view the video.)

Rodriguez, who came to the United States from Venezuela in 1997, serves as Isaiah’s
guide. He carries Isaiah into the car each morning, brings him to get breakfast, assists him at school, and shelters him with food, warmth and safety each night. Rodriguez and Isaiah live with Miguel’s parents, girlfriend and son Elijah.

But somewhere in between Isaiah’s hectic day is time for wrestling practice. Long before Rodriguez had heard about Isaiah’s situation from the school principal, he was the coach of the Long Beach Gladiators: a competitive youth wrestling club in Long Beach. “Wrestling is a sport where you really don’t need to have legs to be an athlete and compete with guys that are normal,” Rodriguez told reporters. In just two years on the mat, Isaiah became one of the better wrestlers in New York for his age division. He stupefied spectators with his heart, determination and will to win.

“(Isaiah) needed to know that there was someone to count on,” Rodriguez stated. “He needed to know that his coach and the wrestling family were there for him, and that’s exactly what we did. It’s more than a team. We help each other out when we need it the most.”

On March 7th, Rodriguez and his headstrong Gladiators participated in the New York State wrestling tournament. The day was winding down, and each match had higher stakes. Isaiah had strung together a few impressive wins, and was looking to earn a spot on the podium. As usual, his long arms suspended him around Rodriguez’s neck as they made their way through the shuffling crowd to the wrestling mat. Isaiah was set to wrestle in a match that would put him in the top six of his weight class. Rodriguez gave him some last-minute motivation before the bout. “We believe in you,” Rodriguez stated. “You know why? Because we know how hard you have worked to be here today.”

Isaiah found himself down by two points late in the match. He shuffled his body around the mat, sizing up his opponent while his coach barked orders. “Two hands on the leg, and then work to the wrist!” Rodriguez instructed. Isaiah did everything in his power, but unfortunately could not find the final takedown to win. He was defeated. But in his heart, he was all but that. “I always try my best,” Isaiah said. “It’s okay if you don’t win, because we go out there, shake hands, say ‘good job’ and that’s it.”

Rodriguez recalls “(Isaiah) says to me ‘Coach, I’m going to have kids’, ‘Coach, I’m going to college,’ Coach, I’m going to be a teacher,’ Coach, I’m going to be a cop.’ I’m afraid that if I’m not in his life right now, that he isn’t going to become the man that he should become.”

To say that this story is about a wrestler with no legs would be doing Isaiah a disservice. Between the adversity he has faced and the people he has touched, this has become the story of a warrior, and the bond he shares with a man who saw not what Isaiah was missing, but rather the many things that he had. Rodriguez has led Isaiah from a troubled past into a promising future. But this bond is not terminal.

Isaiah has developed a sense of humility that so many adults spend their lives searching for. Even at his tender age, he has most of the important things in life figured out. People look at him and feel bad for him, while he feels quite the opposite. To hear his outlook on life is nothing short of inspirational. “My name is Isaiah Bird. I have no legs, but that’s okay, because God made me that way. I’m a Gladiator, and there are no excuses.”
Comprehension questions – answers may be in phrases.

1. Where does Miguel work?

2. What is Kids Helping Kids?

3. Define disposition as used in the article.

4. Who founded The Gladiators?

5. Define adversity as used in the text.

2. Answer each question in one or more complete sentences.

Explain the author’s use of this particular title.

What is meant by the phrase “hard past, remarkable present”?

Explain the phrase “to say they are coach and wrestler doesn’t begin to cover it.”
3. Using different forms of media has its advantages and disadvantages. Using a chart, outline the advantages and disadvantages of the text version of this article as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using the ESPN video format.

4. Explain why people are interested in inspirational movies, videos, and stories. Why do these movies, videos, and stories make money for the producers and authors? Is it all about the money, or do inspirational stories serve another purpose? Answer in a well-developed paragraph.