

Tom-

I'm writing this letter on behalf of Habtamu Kudna. Habtamu is a young African-American student-athlete at Newberg High School. He was born in Ethiopia and was adopted by two white parents when he was a middle school age youngster.

I have had the pleasure of working with Habtamu in and outside of the wrestling program for the past four years. I chose to work with him for several reasons. One of those reasons is that he is a very quiet, courteous, and appreciative young man. Another reason, and most importantly, is that I related with his personal experience.

Having immigrated to this country at the age of nine, I know what it feels like to come to a foreign place and sit in a classroom not knowing what is going on, what is being said, and staring at four blank walls. Going out to the playground watching kids playing and laughing, not knowing what they are doing or whether they are laughing at you or not.

Fortunately for me, through athletics and with the help of some very dedicated coaches, I was able to overcome some of those very traumatic experiences. This was not the case for my younger sister (one year younger), she did not have the same athletic opportunities. In those days, they simply did not exist. She wasn't able to adjust socially, or academically, and as a result, she made some very poor choices in her life. I am quite certain that those poor choices ultimately caused her to lose her life at a fairly young age. I firmly believe that if she had found a connection, like I did in athletics, things would have been much different for her.

I firmly believe that Habtamu is experiencing some of the same issues my sister and I experienced, and more. I am by no means a school psychologist, but being black in a predominantly white school and white community and being a black youngster with white parents must have some type of psychological effect on a teenager.

I'm not saying that Habtamu doesn't have to take some responsibility for his academic shortcomings, but I also feel there are other factors as mentioned above that contributed to that. Along with maybe some institutional or parental oversights.

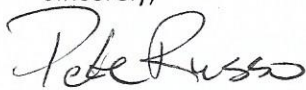
I apologize for making this a personal story but it's something that I feel strongly about and emotionally attached to. Habtamu has attended every practice since this season started in November without wrestling in a single match. That alone should say something about this young man's commitment and character.

You and I, along with many other people, know very well the role athletics play in the lives of young people. I believe we chose this business to help student athletes become better people and to be productive citizens in our communities. Just like we were influenced by coaches before us.

In my opinion, if there ever was a case for a young man to grow culturally, socially, and academically this is certainly one of them!

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pete Russo".

Pete Russo

Athletic Director - Retired