

Teen wrestler has perfect record and a state title. He also has no legs.

By Michael E. Miller, Washington Post on 03.03.16

Word Count **1,133**



Hasaan Hawthorne (right), from Pelham High School in Alabama, competes in the AHSAA State Wrestling Championships at the Von Braun Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Photo: Eric Schultz/AL.com

As a kid, Hasaan Hawthorne would watch World Wrestling Entertainment and imagine himself among the stars. With his babysitter standing in for The Undertaker or another one of WWE's colorful characters, Hawthorne would climb to the top of his couch — in his mind, the top rope of the wrestling ring — and launch himself down on his opponent.

His dream was a common one.

His challenge in getting there, however, was anything but.

Hawthorne was born without tibias, the large, lower leg bones that allow humans to stand. His fibulas were without muscles or nerves. His feet were clubbed, according to AL.com.

So how to explain the scene inside a sweaty Huntsville, Alabama, gymnasium on Saturday? How to explain the blur of a yellow and green uniform, broad back and massive arms, pinning one opponent after another to the mat?

How to explain Hawthorne standing atop the winner's podium with a perfect 37-0 record, a state title and two stumps where his legs once had been?

The answer involves pain, perseverance and a whole lot of sacrifice.

Hasaan was born into a world of worry. He was his parents' first child, and like all first-time parents they had no idea how to raise a kid, let alone one with a serious disability.

After just four months, they were faced with a terrifying decision: allow Hasaan's useless legs and feet to grow or amputate them at the knees?

They chose amputation. And after 10 months of riding around on Tonka trucks, Hasaan received the first in a long line of prosthetic legs, according to the Birmingham News.

At the advice of a doctor, Demond and Felecia Hawthorne let their son learn the hard way: by stumbling through life on his own.

"If we're at the park and we're walking, and he stumbles over a rock or something, people are like, 'Poor baby,' and they try to pick him up," Felecia Hawthorne told AL.com. "We're like, 'Nope. Leave him alone. He knows how to get up.'

"We could be walking through Wal-Mart and all you hear is ... 'Bam,'" she added.

With each passing day, however, the thuds became less frequent. And by the age of 2 or 3, Hasaan had ditched his walker and started to walk around on his hands. He climbed out of his crib and began roughhousing with his father and babysitters.

"We would wrestle every weekend," Duke Frison, a family friend and former babysitter, told AL.com. "You could tell that WWE was a big influence on his playtime because he would always jump on me from 'The top rope,' which was also the top of the couch. For him it was all in playing; sometimes he would hit his head or 'miss.' And as the adult, you want to check to be sure he was OK, but he would start laughing and go right back to having fun."

Despite his disability, Hasaan was a sports fanatic. At age 5, he convinced his parents to let him play baseball.

"Like the whole time, I'm thinking, 'It's not a good idea, it's not a good idea,'" his father told AL.com.

Hasaan broke one ultra-expensive pair of running legs after another by running track or by sliding into second. But there was simply no stopping him. By age 11, he had turned his disability upside down.

"I think it's funner having prosthetics than real legs because you get to do more stuff," he told a reporter. "I don't like to see people sad, I like to cheer people up. I'm just like other people, just with different legs."

At first, Hasaan was humble about his ambitions.

"I like that you get to make a bunch of friends and you get to run," an 11-year-old Hasaan said of playing baseball. "I think able-bodied sports are more of a challenge. I just try to catch up with everyone else and impress my coach."

He had to put up with nicknames like Robokid or rumors that he had lost his legs in a train accident.

"We teach him that life is not fair and to have faith in God and trust in God," Demond told The Associated Press. "We don't want Hasaan to rely on us to take away the bad guys and make the bad stuff go away. We want him to live a proactive life on his own."

As Hasaan got older, however, he slowly figured out in which sports he could compete. He tried playing defensive tackle in football for a while, but offensive linemen on the opposing team kept on landing on him.

That left wrestling, the sport of his WWE dreams.

Again, his father had fears.

"I don't know about this," Demond thought to himself. "I don't know if this is a good idea."

But Hasaan wasn't having any of it. He started wrestling seriously in sixth grade. That was the same year that a one-legged wrestler named Anthony Robles won an NCAA championship after walking onto his college team.

"I said, 'Why can't I do it?'" Hawthorne told AL.com. "It just looked cool to me."

Wrestling allowed Hawthorne to be truly himself: no prosthetics, just his natural grit and determination.

During his high school career, Hawthorne has experienced ups and downs. Competing on his amputated legs, what he calls his "nubs," has led to occasional health complications, requiring additional surgeries and leading to setbacks. But he ended his junior year strongly, finishing third in the state for his weight class.

For his senior year, he dropped 15 pounds, down to just 145. But that number is a bit misleading. Hawthorne stands 6-foot 5-inches tall wearing his prosthetics and with legs, would weigh well over 200 pounds.

Debate rages over whether or not his disability is an advantage on the wrestling mat. Being legless gives him a low center of gravity and makes it harder for opponents to grab him, but it also deprives Hawthorne of the ability to arch his back to avoid pins.

Either way, there is no arguing with the result. This year he went 37-0, capping an undefeated season with a come-from-behind win in the state final. He was also named Alabama's Most Valuable Wrestler for class 6A.

He stood on his nubs on the awards podium, his head just below his vanquished opponents but beaming the smile of an undefeated champion.

The dream that began by watching WWE and throwing himself off his couch isn't over yet, however. Hawthorne said he intends to go to Nationals and then compete in college.

"If everybody gave their heart and desire into doing what they want to do like he does, they'd be a lot more athletes out there that are phenomenal," Scott Verner, his former youth coach, told AL.com. "He does more with his heart and desire than anything else."

Quiz

1 Which viewpoint toward Hawthorne's disability is NOT represented in the article?

- (A) his parents' viewpoint
- (B) a former babysitter's viewpoint
- (C) a former coach's viewpoint
- (D) a wrestling opponent's viewpoint

2 Read the selection from the article.

Hasaan broke one ultra expensive pair of running legs after another by running track or by sliding into second. But there was simply no stopping him. By age 11, he had turned his disability upside down.

Which conclusion is BEST supported by the selection?

- (A) Hasaan's approach toward playing sports was unusually reckless.
- (B) Hasaan was much more talented at the sports he played than his competitors in those sports.
- (C) Hasaan was resolute in his belief that he could participate in sports just as those without his disability did.
- (D) Hasaan's determination to participate in sports reflected an unrealistic attitude toward his disability.

3 Read the paragraph from the article.

Hasaan was born into a world of worry. He was his parents' first child, and like all first-time parents they had no idea how to raise a kid, let alone one with a serious disability.

Which words would BEST replace the phrase "world of worry" in the sentence above?

- (A) difficult relationship
- (B) open environment
- (C) stressful situation
- (D) concerning location

4 Read the sentence from the article.

Debate rages over whether or not his disability is an advantage on the wrestling mat.

What does the word "rages" primarily convey in the sentence?

- (A) The participants in the debate tend to be violent people.
- (B) The topic of the debate is very controversial.
- (C) The debate has continued for a very long time.
- (D) The results of the debate are obvious to everyone.