



SOUTH DAKOTA PUBLIC BROADCASTING PHOTO
 Wagner's Alex Kocer, center, stands on the podium after winning his fifth consecutive Class B wrestling title this past February in Rapid City. Kocer, one of five wrestlers in South Dakota history to win five or more state wrestling titles, has been chosen as the Press & Dakotan Prep Male Athlete of the Year.

Press & Dakotan Male Athlete Of The Year

Five Fine For Wagner's Kocer

BY JILANNE DOOM
 sports@yankton.net

After one of the most decorated wrestling careers in South Dakota state history, there was only one statistic Wagner's Alex Kocer ever kept. "The only stat I really kept was how many times I lost and who I lost to," Kocer said. "I always remembered them better than anything." And compared to his win column, that small number is quite memorable, as Kocer tallied only 27 losses in his entire six-year career as a Red Raider varsity wrestler. A 241-27 overall record, five straight individual titles, and an undefeated 46-0 senior season have led Kocer to be named the 2012 Press & Dakotan Prep Boys' Athlete of the Year. On Dec. 26, he was also announced as the South Dakota Sportswriters Association's Prep Boys' Athlete of the Year. "I'm very happy for him to be recognized for his athletic and academic accomplishments," Wagner head wrestling coach Chas Welch said. "It is rare to find a student athlete that is as dedicated to his schoolwork and athletic goals as Alex is. He is a class act." Welch coached Kocer his senior season where he earned his fifth state title, placing him among the all-time South Dakota greats. With Kocer, only five high school athletes in state history have captured five or more state wrestling

titles. But Kocer attributes most of his success to those who practiced in the Wagner wrestling room with and before him. "The teams I was on pretty much made me," he said. "All the way from when I was in sixth grade all the way up through high school, they all just helped me out throughout the way. And all the coaches, they put us in that position. They told us what we needed to do to win, and I wanted to win. I just give a lot of credit to all those that helped me along the way." Throughout his six years on the varsity squad, Kocer wrestled in four different weight classes, finishing his junior and senior seasons at 152 pounds. Along with his five titles from 2008 to 2012, he also placed fourth at the state tournament as a seventh grader. Kocer not only earned individual success in his career at Wagner, but he was also a member of three consecutive Class B state champion teams during his eighth grade through sophomore seasons. And according to Welch, the team's success meant more to Kocer than any of his individual accolades. "I can specifically remember at the state tournament his senior year, he was far more worried about watching his teammates wrestle than he was about warming up for his own matches," Welch said. "Just another example of how much the concept of team meant to him."

Past Honorees

2006Adam Broders, Bloomfield
2007Riley Reiff, Parkston
2008Earv Archambeau, Avon
2009Robert Kokesh, Wagner
2010Cory Jacobsen, Viborg
2011Kyle McKelvey, Beresford
2012Alex Kocer, Wagner

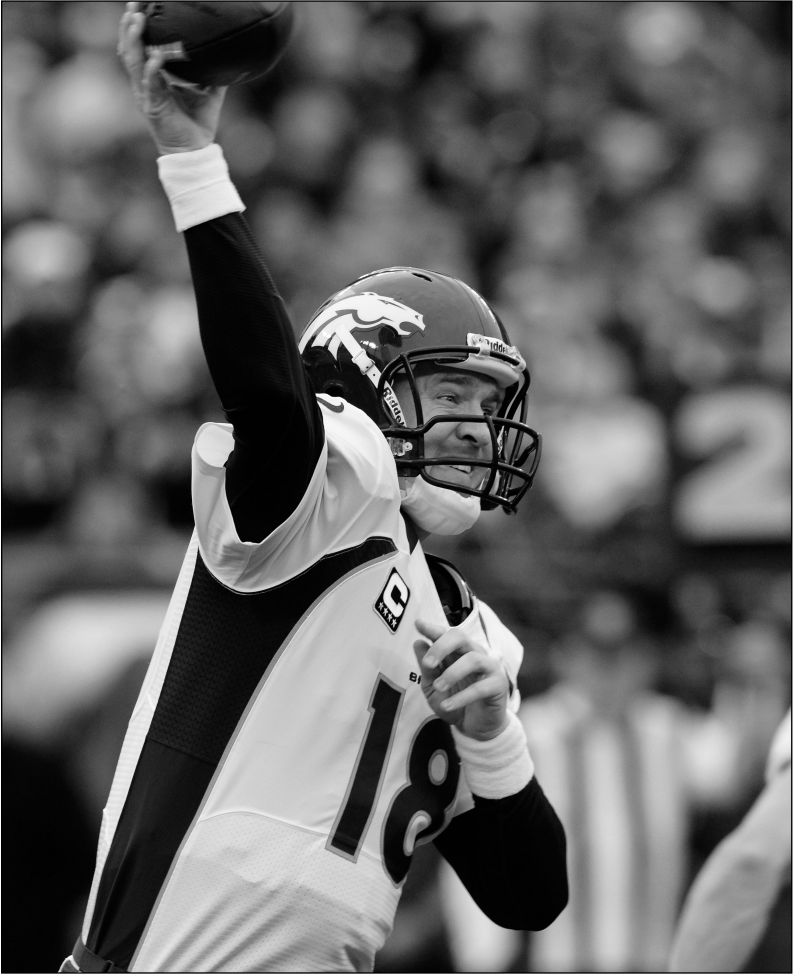
Kocer, a multi-sport athlete at Wagner, also played on the baseball team, earning All-State honors as a designated hitter and a pitcher. In football, he was an all-conference selection as a running back. Whether he was focused on the wrestling team's success, his own matches, or any other athletic competition, he believes the one thing that separated him from his opponents was his drive to not lose. "I just hated losing," he said. "It was just the worst thing. I couldn't even imagine losing sometimes so I just tried not even to think about it." That mentality paired with the skills he worked toward in the practice room shaped a formidable wrestler for the many opponents Kocer faced - a wrestler whose accomplishments now place him among South Dakota's greatest.

You can follow Jilanne Doom on Twitter at twitter.com/JilanneDoom



P&D FILE PHOTO
 Wagner's Alex Kocer takes down Faulkton Area's Austin Thomas during their opening round match at 152 pounds in the South Dakota State Class B Wrestling Tournament in Rapid City.

Manning, Peterson, Pagano: 2012 A Year Of Comebacks To Remember



DOUG KAPUSTIN/MCT
 Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning passes during the first half of their game against the Ravens in Baltimore, Md., on Sunday, Dec. 16.

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
 AP Pro Football Writer

DENVER (AP) — From Peyton Manning overcoming four neck surgeries to Adrian Peterson's rebound from a shredded knee to Chuck Pagano's fight with leukemia, this has been the Year of the Comeback in the NFL.

A season besmirched by tragedies, replacement officials and a bounty scandal also will go down as one in which some of the game's greats not only regained their old form but somehow surpassed it.

There are always feel-good stories about those who overcome long odds and broken bodies to regain at least a sliver of their past glory. This season provided an abundance of them.

When the season started, who could have expected Manning to recapture his MVP play so quickly with a new team? Or for Peterson to come back less than nine months after shredding his left knee. Or for Jamaal Charles to return better than ever after suffering a similar injury.

Then there's Pagano beating the biggest opponent of his life.

A year ago, Manning was in the midst of four neck operations to fix a nerve injury that had caused his right arm to atrophy and had sidelined him for an entire season. Soon, he would say a tearful farewell to Indianapolis, a city he'd put back on the NFL map, and hook up with John Elway in Denver.

Peterson's left knee was still swollen after he'd shredded it on Christmas Eve, an injury similar to the one Charles suffered

earlier last season. Yet both would defy medicine and conventional wisdom alike to rebound as better runners than they were before getting hurt.

Pagano's fight started three months ago when it was disclosed he had cancer, forcing the first-year Colts coach to take time off for chemotherapy treatments. He returned to work this week, taking the reins from assistant Bruce Arians, who guided the team to a surprising playoff berth in his absence.

"When I asked for Bruce to take over, I asked for him to kick some you-know-what and to do great. Damn Bruce, you had to go and win nine games?" Pagano said. "Tough act to follow."

If all goes well at practice this week, Pagano will be on the sideline for the regular-season finale against Houston. That's a final tuneup for the AFC wild-card playoffs that nobody saw coming for the Colts so soon after cutting ties with Manning, who switched teams, coaches, cities and colors and didn't miss a beat in 2012.

Despite a new supporting cast and a 36-year-old body he insists continues to confound him, the quintessential quarterback has had one of the best seasons in his storied career. Manning set franchise or NFL records just about every week while completing 68 percent of his passes for 4,355 yards with 34 TDs and just 11 interceptions.

And yet, he insists he's not anything close to what he used to be, that all he can do is maximize what's left in a body that's been slowed by so many surgeons' scalpels, and trips around the sun.

"I know you don't believe me when I say this; I'm still learning about myself physically and what I can do, it's still the truth," Manning said after guiding Denver to its 10th straight win. "I still have things that are harder than they used to be, so (there's) things I have to work on from a rehab standpoint and a strength standpoint. That's just the way it is and maybe that's the way it's going to be from here on out, I don't know."

Maybe Manning's being modest, maybe he's suckering opponents into blitzing him more often so he can burn them again. Either way, it's a remarkable rebound for a man whose right arm was so weakened after one of his neck surgeries that he could hardly throw the football 15 yards.

Long before Manning ever dreamed he'd be wearing the orange-mane mustang on his helmet instead of the blue and white horseshoe, Manning met up with college buddy Todd Helton of the Colorado Rockies for a workout during last year's NFL lockout. They retreated to an indoor batting cage at Coors Field with a trainer in tow, and Manning's first pass nose-dived so badly that Helton told him to quit goofing around.

Manning wasn't messing with him. He was dead serious. His arm was shot, his future in football in doubt. A few days later, he underwent spinal fusion surgery and would miss the entire 2011 season.

If doctors had told him that was it, Manning said he would have called it a career without regret. But they gave him a bit of