

Featured Article

Andrew Koponen – USA Wrestler Magazine

April 15, 2023 Issue

Wrestling USA



www.WrestlingUSA.com

April 15, 2023

Volume 58, No. 4

\$5.00



Always Moving Forward

Co-Star of Hit T.V. Series 1923 Shares How Wrestling Helped Him Through the Stress of Policework

By Al Fontes

Andrew Koponen “aka, Kope” was an All-American wrestler in the 1980s and ‘90s, eventually taking the Bronze medal at the 1990 U.S. Olympic Festival in Greco-Roman. He then accomplished his life dream to become a Police Officer in Oakland, California, but was involved in several major traumatic incidents while on duty, which eventually forced him to leave police work after only eight years. He, however, transitioned to the movie industry where he has acted in approximately twenty-five motion pictures and television shows, most of them as Police Officer roles. Here is a back story and interview highlighting his journey.

Kope was born in the small suburban town of Livermore, California, where farms are scattered throughout the Tri-Valley and hillside areas, residents gather for the annual rodeo and parade, tourists and locals alike enjoy one of 50 wineries and breweries. His father, a nuclear physicist at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and his homemaker mother, raised four kids in this small town. During Kope’s childhood, his parents taught him that in life he should do the best he can at whatever he set his mind to pursue, regardless of whether it is in school, sports, work and life in general. In brief, never give up! Not competing in any organized sports during his early childhood, Kope spent a majority of his free time being adventurous and exploring his environment, new places, and having fun with his family and friends. It was not until his freshman year at Livermore High School that he ever considered participating in sports. At the request of his good friend, Will Ormond, Kope joined him on the wrestling team, which at the time was among the top programs in Northern California.

If his first try at wrestling was any indication of what to expect in his future, it would have been easier to just give up and try something else. During his freshman season, Kope took his lumps on the mat, winning about five out of twenty or so Junior Varsity (JV) matches. His sophomore year wasn’t any better, especially when he was given the opportunity to move up the ladder of competition a few times and compete at the varsity level. Only winning a few matches that season, Kope understood that something had to change, so between his sophomore and junior years, he joined a couple of his teammates and attended the 14-day J Robinson Intensive Camp during the summer. This experience dramatically changed his outlook, work ethic, and how he approached the sport of wrestling.

“Always moving forward...never giving up.”
- Kope’s life motto

Dating back many centuries, one of the Latin proverbs that is likely engraved in stone somewhere; Repetitio est mater studiorum, or as translated in English, “Repetition is the mother of all learning,” still applies today as it did back then. Well, as stated prior, Kope is one to never quit or give up. With a great deal of dedication, determination, and desire to excel in wrestling, Kope’s performance on the mat exponentially improved during his junior season on the varsity squad. That season, he won approximately twenty-five matches and continued his time on the mat competing for the Tri-Valley Wrestling Club in the Bay Area. His senior year, he won approximately thirty-five out of forty matches and earned All East Bay Athletic League honors and brought home a medal at the CIF North Coast Section Championships. Upon

his 1989 summer graduation, Kope placed third at the Junior State Greco-Roman Championships and represented Team California at the Junior Nationals in Iowa.

After high school, Kope still had the desire to compete and continued his wrestling career at Humboldt State University in Northern California. While at Humboldt, he competed for two seasons and earned All-American honors at the 1990 Espoir Nationals in Greco-Roman (finalist) and a Bronze medal at the US Olympic Festival. Unfortunately, the Humboldt State program was discontinued after his sophomore season, but that did not deter his continued commitment on the mat or in the classroom. In fact, he increased his training regimen and won an Open Division California State Championship, added another All-American honor at the 1991 Espoir Nationals, and several years later competed at the Olympic trials in Greco-Roman. Continuing his desire to compete, Kope wrestled at several local open division tournaments in the Bay Area until finally wrapping it up in the late 1990s. Overall, Kope competed in just over 1,000 matches in his ten years of competition. According to Kope, “if you do something 1,000 times over and over again, you’re going to get good at it.”

Earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Humboldt State, Kope’s childhood dream was to become a Police Officer, but realized that earning a position in a police department is not an easy process. In fact, the process is often long and demanding; testing, interviews, physical exams, psychological testing, and more interviews. More often than not, the process discourages a large percentage of the potential candidates from even trying, but not Kope. For several years, Kope applied to several police departments, but failed to make the final cut. In the meantime, he worked for PG&E as a meter reader and coached wrestling at his alma mater, Livermore High School and the Tri-Valley Wrestling Club. In addition, he participated in local theater and participated in many plays, such as Fiddler on the Roof and The Nutcracker. After several attempts with the Oakland Police Department (OPD), he made the final cut and attended in the 1999 Police Academy. Upon graduating from the academy, he joined the Army National Guard and served a tour in Kuwait just after completing his field training qualification with OPD in 2000.

Working at the Oakland Police Department was a lifelong goal and his dream job after college. Despite having a demanding workload, Kope continued coaching at the high school level and participated in theater when time permitted. Having earned multiple All-American honors in wrestling, graduating from college, serving his country, and now working at his dream job, he felt that his life was almost complete. Unfortunately, working within confines of the tough and dangerous streets of Oakland can alter one’s life in a millisecond. After about a year or so on the job, a life changing experience, while working the midnight shift, altered his life forever. Always moving forward in life, the following is a comprehensive Q&A interview I had with Kope discussing his wrestling experience, policework, the friendly fire accident, acting, screenwriting, and where he is today.



Andrew Koponen
Humboldt State

Q & A INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW KOPONEN

HOW DID YOU FIRST GET INVOLVED IN THE SPORT OF WRESTLING?

KOPE - I basically started wrestling when I was a freshman in high school. A friend encouraged me into showing up. My first match was a knockdown drag-out match, which I won 7-6. I was so out of shape that I puked twice, but I never gave up and pushed on. My record the rest of the year was mostly losses, but I kept at it. Something inside of me sparked a fire. Wrestling showed me that it was a challenge that required persistence and dedication, something that gave me a platform to push myself as far as I wanted to go. That fire has never stopped..

WHO WAS YOUR BIGGEST INFLUENCE IN THE SPORT?

KOPE - No doubt, my high school wrestling coach Steve Page. He dedicated his life to wrestling and I needed that as I wanted to go to every wrestling tournament, every wrestling camp, and anything else that had to do with wrestling. He was there year-round to take us. I don't know very many coaches that gave more than he did.

WHAT ARE YOUR FONDEST MEMORIES OF WRESTLING AT LIVERMORE HIGH SCHOOL AND HUMBOLT STATE UNIVERSITY?

KOPE - I find that my fondest memory of wrestling is the friendships I've built over the many years. This applies not only to my lifetime friends, but also to just showing up at the California State Championships each year and hearing from my long ago opponents who now have families and children who are now part of the wrestling world.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU COACHED THE SPORT OF WRESTLING?

KOPE - I started coaching full time at Livermore High School after college in 1993. We had an awesome team with 60+ wrestlers and a coaching staff of at least 13-15. Awesome times and great memories. The kids like the Kavanagh brothers, Rich Naval, Joe Iacono, Richard Diaz, Jerry Bohlander, Pete Williams, Stephen De La Cruz and many more, worked so hard and it wasn't uncommon to bring quite a few wrestlers to the state tournament each year. I coached for many good years until about the time I was accepted into the Oakland Police Department in 1999.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT COACHING?

KOPE - Coaching is giving back to the world and it shows a great respect to all those that coached you in the past. It is also a joy to impart all your knowledge to the next generation and see the magic keep going. Nothing can be better than watching a wrestler use a move that we taught and see it be successful.

WHAT LIFE LESSONS DID YOU LEARN IN THE SPORT OF WRESTLING THAT APPLIES IN YOUR DAY-TO-DAY LIFE, BOTH AS A FAMILY MAN AND ENTREPRENEUR?

KOPE - Always moving forward...Never giving up. Life isn't easy. All kinds of trials come at you, and wrestling teaches you to get up when your knocked down. When that opponent has you on your back and it takes everything, you got to turn over, you learn an incredibly valuable tool in life. This mental attitude has kept me moving forward under every situation that I've been in whether it be when I was in the Army, on the streets of Oakland, writing a screenplay, or changing diapers at 0300 in the morning.

IT'S MY UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU ARE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THEATER AND ACTING. PLEASE EXPLAIN.

KOPE - In 1992, I was introduced to the world of theater by performing in a local musical production of Fiddler on the Roof. It was hard work, but I thoroughly loved the cast companionship and performing on stage. From then on, I had the bug of acting and dancing, performing in countless shows, musicals, and productions. Over the years, I started professional acting,

joining the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and have been cast as background in movies such as San Andreas, Ant-Man, Venom 2, and The Matrix 4. Just recently, I was cast as a co-star in Taylor Sheridan's 1923 as a bailiff in the courtroom. I got a few lines in that one, which was quite an accomplishment.

BEING A POLICE OFFICER WITH OAKLAND PD, PLEASE EXPLAIN HOW YOUR EXPERIENCE SHAPED YOUR LIFE AND THEIR CORRELATION WITH THE SPORT OF WRESTLING AND LIFE IN GENERAL?

KOPE - I was, and still am, very proud to have worked as a policeman in Oakland, but it can be also be a very dangerous environment, not just physically, but psychologically.

HOW SO?

KOPE - Out of college, it was my dream to be an Oakland Policeman and when I was hired over 20 years ago, I believed that my life was complete. However, in 2001 with just a year on the job, another Officer and I would end up fatally shooting a man with a gun whom we thought was about to kill another person on the ground. That man with the gun turned out to be a fellow Officer who was working undercover. In five seconds, my life was turned upside down.

HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO DEAL WITH THAT?

KOPE - For many years, I didn't. Saying that I hit rock bottom would be an understatement. The severe psychological guilt and suffering that I went through is by far the worst moment of my life. Additionally, a lawsuit by the Johnnie Cochran law firm had knocked me down like no one could imagine. Had I not been a wrestler, I have no doubt I would not be here today.

HOW DID WRESTLING GET YOU THROUGH SUCH A HORRIBLE ACCIDENT?

KOPE - I believe a wrestler can imagine this; and that is I was on my back for years and was in a horrible state of disrepair. However, a wrestling friend had told me man-to-man that at some point I had to make a conscious decision to either stay down or pick myself up. I took those words to heart and eventually entered myself into a PTSD retreat, the West Coast Post-Trauma Retreat (WCPR), designed for Emergency Responders. That place saved my life.

WHERE DID YOU GO FROM THERE?

KOPE - I was able to stay on the force for another six years, but when I was in another shooting with a car-jacking suspect, I was honest enough with myself to admit my time as an Oakland Policeman was over. I did, however, stay in contact with that PTSD retreat and have dedicated the last 15 years in helping other Emergency Responders in their current struggles with PTSD.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU CAN ALMOST SAY THAT YOU'RE STILL A COACH?

KOPE - That's a good way to put it. I've so often been encouraged to pick up coaching wrestling again, but my life is now dedicated to helping those fellow Police Officers that are going through a hard time. Most citizens don't know this but roughly 3x as many Police Officers commit suicide than die on the streets. I've found a calling where I can be a part of an organization that does so much to help prevent that. I feel that I owe it to our country's Emergency Responders in trying to find something good to come out of such an American tragedy.

HOW DOES YOUR ACTING FIT INTO ALL OF THIS?

KOPE - Going into the movie industry was my PTSD therapy. I couldn't be a cop for real anymore. I knew that. The thought of having to shoot someone again scared me to death, especially if it's the wrong guy. However, I could still be a policeman on film. This was my way of getting back on the horse again.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO WEAR THE UNIFORM AGAIN, EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE NOW IN THE MOVIES?

KOPE - At first, I was really nervous and I noticed I had a lot of anxiety symptoms, i.e., sweaty palms, increased heart rate, and rising blood pressure. I knew I was just in a movie, but my body didn't.

HOW DID YOU PERFORM ON SET THEN?

KOPE - Once my body realized there was no danger, I eventually relaxed and performed quite well. I think that's really what the definition of PTSD is all about: You're not on the battlefield anymore, but your mind thinks you are. So, the best way to heal is to test your psychological system through a slow methodological process to convince your mind that you're not in danger anymore.

YOU MENTIONED YOU WROTE A SCREENPLAY, IS THAT WHAT THIS IS ABOUT?

KOPE - Yes, I wrote about the friendly fire accident. I focused on who I was before, how it affected me, and how I was able to find life again. I've been relentlessly working on this project for the last eight years and my goal is that this eventual movie can be an inspiration to Emergency Responders across the country in helping them get through their own personal struggles with PTSD.

WHERE ARE YOU NOW WITH THE SCREENPLAY?

KOPE - I'm very close to getting it to production. I'm working with an industry company who's made many great movies. We've got a budget, schedule, and several high level actor's committed. We're now shopping for a director and then we'll start casting. I'm hoping that we should be filming by the summer or fall of this year.

ONE LAST QUESTION THAT I MUST ASK. DID YOU GET TO MEET HARRISON FORD WHILE ON THE SET OF 1923?

KOPE - I did, and he was a very nice guy and a pleasure to work with on set. When he found out I was a former policeman, he personally came up to me, shook my hand, and sent out his support for all the other emergency responders out there. One final notable moment I had was when the cameras were facing me and the judge. Harrison and Robert Patrick (the L.A.P.D. cop from Terminator 2) were in the back jokingly making funny faces at me, trying to get me to break character. I held my ground. After the cut, Harrison told me I was a solid actor. That made my day.



WRESTLING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Bronze Medalist – 1990 US Olympic Festival (Greco-Roman)
- 2x Espoir All-American/Finalist (Greco-Roman)
- Competed in the 1996 U.S. Olympic Trials (Greco-Roman)
- Greco-Roman State Champion (Open Division)
- College Wrestler – Humboldt State University
- California Junior National Team – 1989 (Greco-Roman)
- CIF North Coast Section Medalist – 1989
- Team Captain – Livermore High School (NCS)

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

- Master's Degree in Emergency Management – USC (pending)
- Master's Degree in Education – University of Phoenix
- Bachelor's Degree in Political Science – Humboldt State University

MILITARY SERVICE

- Army National Guard – Mortarman and Machine Gunner
- Served with B Company, 184th Infantry Air Assault in Kuwait

ACTOR CREDITS

- 1923 (Drama TV Series)
- The Matrix Resurrections 2021
- Venom: Let There Be Carnage
- Professional Actor and a member of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG)
- American Fighter (Movie – Assistant Wrestling Coach)
- The Master (Movie – V.A. Patient)
- San Andreas (Movie – Police Officer)
- Ant-Man (Movie – Police Officer)
- US (Movie – Beach Person)
- Steve Jobs (Movie – Chef)
- Chance (TV Series – Police Officer)
- When We Rise (TV mini-Series – Police Officer)
- Looking (TV series – Rugby Player)
- Written in Blood (TV – Police Officer)
- 13 Reasons Why (TV Series – Detective)
- I (Almost) Got Away with It (TV Series documentary – Police Officer)
- I Solved a Murder (TV Series – Police Officer)
- Hemingway & Gellhorn (TV Movie – Solider)
- Contagion (Movie – Bystander)

SCREENPLAY AWARDS – OAKLAND

- Best Screenplay (California Independent Film Festival – 2019)
- Official Section (Catalina International Film Festival – 2019)
- Semi-finalist (Flickers' Rhode Island International Film Festival – 2019)
- Official Selection (Madrid International Film Festival – 2019)
- Official Finalist (Amsterdam International Film Festival – 2019)
- Winner (Cordillera International Film Festival – 2019)
- Official Selection (California Independent Film Festival – 2019)
- Semi-Finalist (Save the Cat Screenplay Challenge -2019)
- Semi-Finalist (Utah Film Festival and Awards – 2019)
- Official Selection (American Screenwriting Conference – 2019)
- Best Dialogue Feature Script (Queen Palm International Film Festival – Feb. 2019)
- Bronze Award – Beverly Hills Screenplay Contest (Historical / Biographical – 2018)
- Best Original Screenplay Feature (London Independent Film Awards – Dec. 2018)
- Honorable Mention (Depth of Field International Film Festival – 2018)
- Best First Time Screenwriter (Los Angeles Film Awards – Jan. 2018)
- Official Selection (Beverly Hills Film Festival – 2018)