John Peterson realized a dream 40 years ago when he won a silver medal in wrestling at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany. John Peterson wrestled at UW-Stout through 1971, and then won Olympic silver and gold medals, respectively, in 1972 and 1976.

UW-Stout alumnus who won gold and silver ministers to athletes

By UW-Stout News Bureau
MENOMONIE — John Peterson realized a dream 40 years ago when he won a silver medal in wrestling at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany.

When the UW-Stout graduate and Comstock native returned home, the significance of what he had accomplished began to sink in.

"I had no idea that it would be such a big deal," Peterson said. "The governor (of Wisconsin) came up to our little town and about 3,000 people gathered in the hay field of our neighbor, who had organized this homecoming. It amazed me and still does."

Life never would be the same for Peterson, who would add to his fame four years later by going unbeaten in the Olympics in Montreal, winning a gold medal in the same 180.5-pound weight class.

With the ending of the Summer Olympics in London earlier this month, Peterson has some advice for the athletes returning home - with medals or without - who put everything they had into their sport.

"My main advice would be this, and in some ways it's hard to say this: You have to make something else more important in your life than a medal. If not, then there's a danger," Peterson said.

Peterson's focus in life has been his religious faith. He has worked for Athletes in Action, a Christian-based international organization, since 1973. His faith in God helped him keep his life in perspective after his Olympic career ended, he said.

Peterson has used his fame to open doors in his ministry around the U.S. and world, he said. He is a volunteer coach with USA Wrestling and annually attends the NCAA tournament. Last year he took a team to Hungary. He knows many U.S. wrestlers who competed in London and followed their matches.

Peterson works each year at a wrestling camp run by his brother, Ben, who also won Olympic gold and silver medals. He does AIA Bible studies with wrestlers at three colleges in Minnesota. In June he took Christian wrestlers to Mongolia, a place he has visited many times through AIA.

"I'm really appreciative of the opportunities I've had being an Olympic champion. It has helped tremendously with the ministry," he said.

Olympic wrestling rules have changed significantly since the 1970s, and so have the Olympics, Peterson said. In the 1970s professional athletes couldn't compete in the Olympics.
"The whole Olympic movement has become much more commercialized. There are some good and bad things to that. But some things never change, the competitive attitude of athletes and their desire to perform well. It's amazing athleticism, and that never changes," he said.

Peterson graduated from UW-Stout in 1971 with a degree in industrial education and taught for one year at Madison West High School. He left teaching to focus on wrestling, which paid off with the gold medal four years later.

UW-Stout no longer has a wrestling team. Peterson, who won three conference titles at UW-Stout, this year was named to the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference wrestling all-time team. The award for the top wrestler in the WIAC tournament each year is named after Peterson.

Peterson, 63, graduated from Cumberland High School. He lives in the farmhouse where he grew up. He and his wife, Nancy, have five children and four grandchildren.