Taylor Dupre graduated from DeKalb High School where he was active in a number of organizations while serving as a captain for the varsity football and track teams. Taylor is still active at NIU where he has co-founded the NIU Club Track and Field Team and is a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars. Taylor hopes to earn a degree in civil/environmental engineering, with which he wants to design and facilitate the construction of bridges and dams. “The Spoils of War” marks Taylor’s determination and diligence in reaching success. Writing this essay meant a lot to Taylor, for he could share the intense atmosphere of his training during his last year in high school.

Taylor wrote this essay in Rikki Knutti’s English 103 course during the fall of 2010.

Note: “The Spoils of War” won first place in the Y1 Writes: A Collection of Student Essays contest.
THE SPOILS OF WAR
TAYLOR DUPRE

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “Victory belongs to the most persevering.” Today, I proved the most persevering. I had trained the hardest, prepared mentally and physically with 100 percent dedication, never took my eyes off the prize, and now I was the one standing tallest on the podium. I surveyed my territory like a king on his terrace. I couldn’t help but wonder where the “experienced” vaulters were. Where were the vaulters who were featured in the local papers the week before and favored with runaway victory, or the ones with the expensive poles and big schools with all the money, or the ones with the private coaches? They were below me, right alongside all the other athletes who took Saturdays off, or the ones who slacked in practice because they were tired from a long day at school, or the ones who just felt like taking it easy for the day. I didn’t know what a day off was, at least not for the last eight months, and now I was standing above them. They were the bricks upon which my pedestal of victory was built. The mortar was made of a sweet mixture of my sweat and the saliva dripping from the open mouths of everyone in Warrior stadium. I could barely hear my name on the loudspeaker over the droning beat of my heart, but I knew it was my turn. I was the only one left. I had won.

“You want to pole vault?” was the puzzled, practical-minded response I received from our Athletic Director as I stood in his office one December afternoon. I was surrounded by pictures of past athletes who had made a name for themselves at DeKalb High School, and among them were more than a handful of exceptionally great pole-vaulters. Mike Maloney was my favorite: Conference Champion and All-State Vaulter in 1986 and All-American in 1987. He was the pinnacle, and his photo hung right above the A.D.’s head. He was mid-vault, probably at state, and looked as if his life were lived in the air. A slight smirk was visible in the left corner of his mouth as he made his trade look painfully simple. His long, blonde 80’s style hair glowed as if he was right
next to the sun, and he could have been. His highest vault was sixteen feet, a height that wasn’t even in my vocabulary.

“Yes, sir, I do,” I said simply. I had an exponentially more convincing argument drawn up in my head from a day or so of contemplation, but all I could do was agree. No persuasive evidence, no thought provoking win-win scenario to convince him.

“We haven’t funded pole vault at this school for some time; after the accident, we simply just did not continue endorsement of the event in our Athletic Department. We don’t even have a pole vault coach, Taylor.”

My heart reached down and punched my knee caps. I’d done my research: twenty years before, a vaulter, one of many in a long succession of nationally ranked DHS pole-vaulters, had died tragically after being impaled through the chest by a broken pole. This did not faze me in the least. The pure, unbridled thrill of flight consumed my thoughts; there was no room for fear. As for the lack of coaching, I was confident that my “Google-ing” skills would provide substantial compensation. I would close my eyes and get a hazy glimpse of what I longed to be: a pole vaulter. It was a dream of flight, triumph, and excitement of the unknown, and it consumed me. My daydream was cut short by his hesitant agreement; “Well, we did raise quite a bit of money through the track fundraiser this year. Why not?”

Two weeks later, my first pole arrived, along with a plethora of athletic accessories. The possibilities seemed endless, and I began to train immediately. The sprint workouts were brutal, and our 4 x 1 relay trained harder than anyone, but no one cared about pole vault. It took no priority over anything, and as a result, I practiced double. The team would leave me and drag off exhausted from a hard day’s work. By myself I would go through the YouTube videos I had watched the night before. The fundamentals: pole position, posture, plant technique, body control, and whatever other tips I could pick up from the internet were my focus. It was still only January and indoor season didn’t start for another month. DHS didn’t have an indoor facility, so I was thrown into the first competition without ever even leaving the ground. The first few meets witnessed a rise in my dedication and confidence as the bar also rose. I kept working and improving. The bar would rise, and I would rise to meet the challenge. My pole began to feel like an extension of my body. After outdoor season
arrived, my training and dedication only intensified. I trained on Saturdays and sometimes on Sundays. I memorized countless videos and techniques that flashed like broken records through my mind all day long. When I woke up I would be thinking about pole vault. When I went to bed I would dream about pole vault.

It was a beautifully warm and sunny day, like most cliché memories are, but this was different. The scene in Warrior stadium was oddly tranquil and yet the intensity was thick and volatile. It was still early, but the stadium was already bustling with activity. The sectional meet had finally arrived, and I had been preparing for weeks. My weight and overall health were my top priorities, so my diet for the last three days had consisted of protein shakes, cranberries, almonds, bagels, and water. I was in the zone. My mind and body were united under one goal: the State Championship Finals. A mark of thirteen feet and six inches would put me through to a level of competition that most pole vaulters, or athletes for that matter, only dream of. I came into competition seeded dead last as a result of a less than stellar performance the week before at the conference championships. My highest vault in previous competition was 12 feet 9 inches, but I wasn’t worried. Rated eighteenth out of eighteen vaulters, I knew I was the sleeper. No one had any idea of my potential. They didn’t recognize the time and sweat I had invested into this one afternoon of competition. Weigh-ins and warm-ups were finished and the stands were full. The quiet murmur of parents discussing their opinions of the outcomes began to grow into cheers as the beginning group of vaulters made their first few attempts. My turn came, and my hard work began to show as I soared over the opening height of 12’3” with ease. 12’3’, 12’9’, 13’0’, 13’3’ one after another; I simply couldn’t miss, and the crowd was beginning to notice. It was automatic, every time, like a machine made for no other reason but to pole vault. One, two, three, reach back, step forward, deep breath, pole up, step back and go. Every time, seven lefts; I had only seven left-footed steps to gather enough energy and make my body airborne. No more. No less. I blazed down the runway with unparalleled determination. My plant was perfect and explosive. Every time the pole would bend like a limp noodle from the force
of my inertia, and then quickly recoil, propelling me to new heights. I shouldn’t even have made opening height according to the programs, but here I was knocking on the door to the State Finals. I wasn’t even in the top ten at the beginning of the day and suddenly found myself one of just four vaulters remaining. The bar finally rested at 13’6”. I needed only three more inches; five months of hell for three inches.

A quiet, sporadic breeze whispered across my shoulder blades, and tunnel vision had taken its full effect. In front of me, seventy-three-and-a-half feet away, lay a beast whose sole purpose was simply to sit and watch me fail. The wind had gently shifted and it now directed me straight to the mouth of the monster. My path to battle was laid out for me, paved in red recycled tire composite. I was consumed with fierce reserve, ready to do what I knew I could do, and yet the ever-present fear of failure was too resilient to completely ignore. The consequences that accompanied such defeat lurked as if a tiny gremlin were sitting on the end of my pole, teasing and taunting me, desperately attempting to rile up the sleeping butterflies nested in my stomach. Before he could do any damage, a gentle warm breeze quickly whisked him away to the edge of the runway. The time had come, and the machine was turned on. One, two, three, reach back, step forward, deep breath, pole up, step back and go. My ascent resembled flight over the gates of hell and into the rays of heaven. The fall to earth took decades. Simple bliss consumed me; nothing else in the world was clouding my mind accept the clouds I felt around me as I lost altitude. My body sank into the soft victory below and time froze. I thought of my family, the gained support of my team and my school, and I thanked Jesus, for without him none of this was possible. Time restarted faster than ever and I bounced to my feet like I was made of rubber. This was my moment. Half of the crowd was cheering in approval, and the other half was trying to piece together their thoughts from broken words falling from frozen mouths like hail to the stadium floor. Walking became a formality. I was gliding on air. The podium came into view, and the butterflies woke up. They were almost as excited as I was to see the steps. As I stood in amazement on my pedestal, I couldn’t help but giggle to myself. My perseverance and unrelenting dedication had culminated into a vault that left me falling from the top of the world, only to land right back on the top of the world.