



WRESTLE

THE JOCK OF ALL TRADES TESTS HIS SKILLS ON THE MAT

by Nick Mystrom

Like most Americans, my exposure to wrestling has been limited to cable television nonsense like WWE and WWF. With Vince McMahon acting as a parody of himself, orchestrating acrobatic but contrived antics by his juiced-up, spray-tanned, speedo-wearing cronies, I am continually amazed and disappointed in the American people for tuning in and giving such absurd programming such high ratings. Of course, you have to be athletic to perform the way they do in that ring. But when the outcome of your chosen sport is never in question, you are not an athlete.

Every four years, much more admirable forms of wrestling called Greco-Roman and freestyle poke their heads into the sunlight at the Olympics. But other than Rulon Gardner, I can't name a single wrestler from the recent Games. There is no other example in the world of two sports (Vince McMahon's version and the Olympic version) calling themselves the same thing and being such polar opposites.

Since watching my buddies in high school who were wrestlers trying to cut weight, endure cauliflower ear and train harder than I ever did for football, I have always been curious about this primal sport. Of course, plenty of people are curious about things (skydiving, cliff jumping, alligator training) without ever actually trying them. Similar to those people, my curiosity with wrestling never intrigued me enough to actually put on a singlet - until now.

Before I met Steve Kimpel, the wrestling coach at the Colorado School of Mines, I saw his photo. You ever notice how you can tell a wrestler by just looking at his photo? He had a thick neck, pronounced facial features, slight remains of scars and broken noses, and the infamous cauliflower ear. I was half expecting him to hang up on me when I asked him about the possibility of wrestling one of his athletes, but he was totally receptive.

Not only receptive, but enthusiastic, as I explained to him my standard protocol: I'd like to meet with you and the team, interview you, get an official uniform, get a lesson for a half hour and then have a match. He was game. We arranged a time to meet when the majority of the team would be assembled for a workout.

I brought an entourage of four with me to the gym - two friends who are wrestlers and two friends who were interested in watching me get my ass

MENTAL



Tale of the Tape



JOCK

COREY SWANSON

HEIGHT	
6'4"	5'8"
WEIGHT	
230 lbs.	157 lbs.
AGE	
35	18
WRESTLING EXPERIENCE	
Six backyard matches	11 years (Colorado state champion)
ESTIMATED CAREER RECORD	
2-4	180-35
REASON FOR WRESTLING	
Drunk	Passion, Dedication, Competition
FAVORITE WRESTLER	
Nacho Libre	Cael Sanderson

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kicked by a teenager. The sweaty young lads were in the middle of what appeared to be a fairly casual offseason workout when I walked in.

I was pretty inconspicuous until I went into coach Kimpel's office and emerged in a skintight singlet, wrestling shoes, headgear and knee pads. You can always tell when a weekend warrior tries to make up for his lack of talent by getting aggressive with his gear and uniform, like the 5-foot-8 point guard at the YMCA with more shoulder hair than skills, a full Kobe uniform, knee braces, headband, wrist bands, rec specs, etc. I've always tried not to be *that guy*. Unfortunately, when I walked in to meet the team in full regalia, I was precisely that guy.

Now the whole concept of the Jock is that I am far outmatched in terms of experience by my opponent. So to offset this advantage, there has to be a mitigating factor. In this case, the playing field was level by the fact that I was going to outweigh my opponent by a lot. The key when choosing my competitor was properly gauging exactly how tiny this wrestler would have to be for me to have a shot at beating him.

I decided to ask Coach Kimpel whom he thought my most worthy adversary would be. It came down to two wrestlers, Dylan Nielson and Corey Swanson. Dylan wrestles in the 133-pound weight class and Corey wrestles at 149. Since it's the offseason, they are both up to around 145 and 160, respectively. The coach convinced me that I could handle the bigger opponent, so Corey, the former Colorado state champion, was the choice.

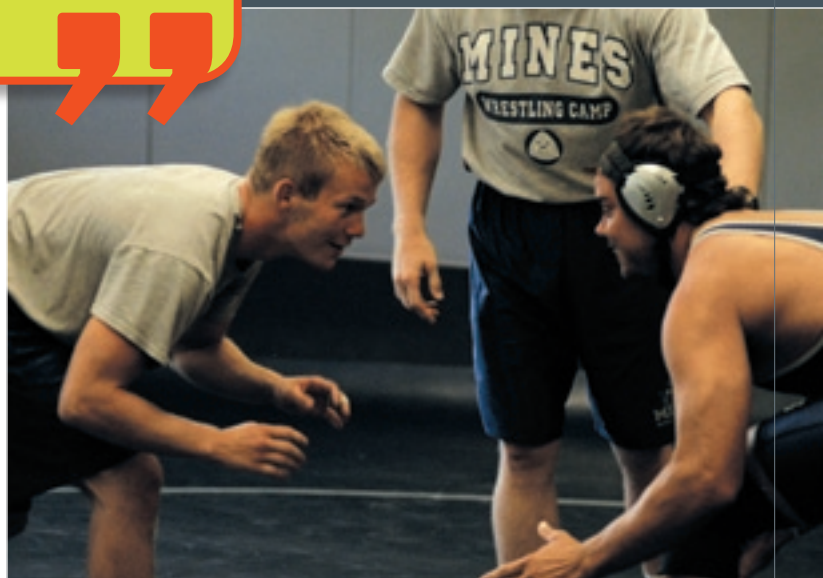
Once my opponent was established, Coach Kimpel assessed my chances.

"You look athletic and you are definitely bigger and stronger than him; so if you move well and don't get too tired, you probably have a good chance," he offered. "The biggest thing people don't realize about wrestling is how important endurance is. A lot of times, it's not the best wrestler who wins, but the guy who's in the best shape."

That's great news. On the off chance that I am not a better wrestler than this kid who has wrestled every day for the last 10 years, I need to be in better shape than he is.

"What about my strategy, coach?" I asked. "I mean, my last official match was at the Kappa Sigma house at 4:00 a.m. in 1994 after some keg stands."

"Okay, you gotta keep him off your legs because that's where he's gonna want to go," Coach K answered. "Use your reach to keep him off you, and your strength to get up quickly and earn escape points when you're down."





Like the Olympic versions, collegiate wrestling requires speed, strength, toughness and, as I would later find out, endurance. The coach gave me a brief session on the mat, encouraging me to move laterally as I had in basketball, get low as if in a football stance and keep my arms up to fend off my opponent. The whole team watched as I tried my best to ignore their snickering and absorb as much as possible before the big match. After the fellas had a chance to watch me in action, I asked them for their predictions.

First, I asked Corey.

"Well, I hope I can beat you," he answered. "Hopefully by the third period, that extra weight will start to slow you down. I've noticed big guys start to gasp a lot toward the end of the match."

"So you think you're going to pin me?"

"Pin you? No, but I'll win on points."

Other predictions ranged from me getting pinned early to losing a close match on points. One wrestler actually picked me to pin Corey within one minute because he said I looked strong and athletic. I asked him if he wanted to get a drink later.

The boys then explained to me how the rounds work. A three-minute round where both wrestlers start in a standing position is followed by a pair of two-minute rounds in which the wrestlers alternate starting in top position and bottom position. Then they quickly briefed me on some rules. No fish hooking, no biting, no gouging, no headlocks without an arm.

After my briefing, I decided a trip to the bathroom was in order. Not until reviewing the video and hidden audio after the match was I privy to his teammates' advice to their comrade. Corey, not as confident as he let on in front of me, whispered, "This guy is huge; what's my strategy?" His teammate replied, "Get down on him and start pounding him, just so he knows this is a real sport. And then, just choke him out a little."

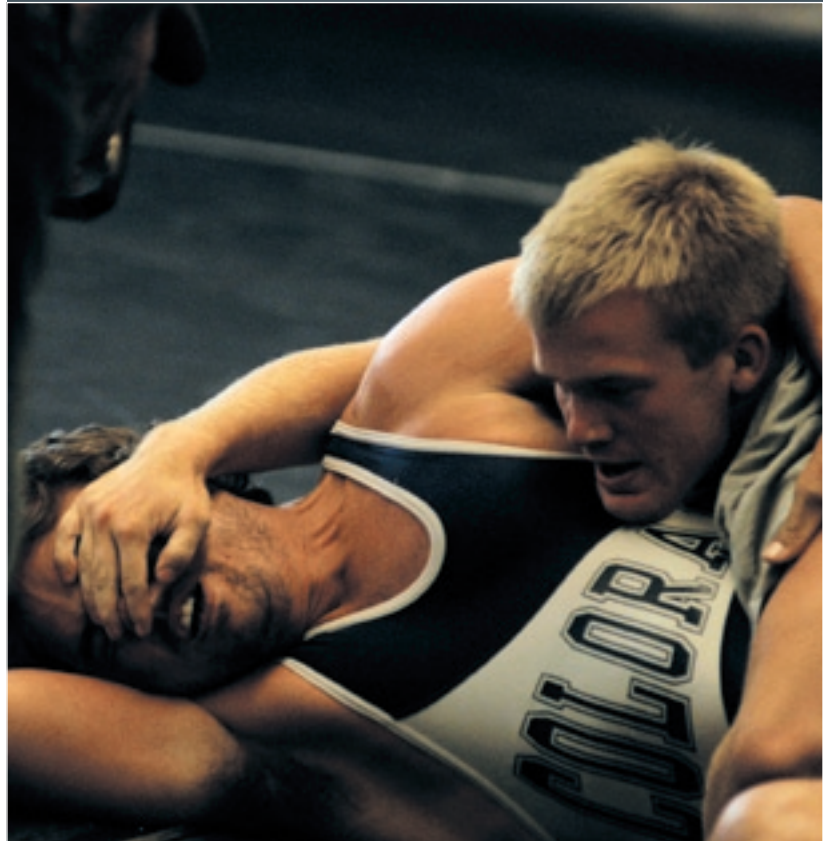
"You want me to cut the air? Right away?" Corey asked.

Coach Kimpel heard what was going on and chimed in. "No, don't put him out in the beginning, please!"

Oblivious to the conspiracy against me and my trachea, I returned from the bathroom in good spirits, ready to show this chump who's the boss. The good thing about being the Jock is that hope definitely springs eternal. I go into every match liking my chances, and today is no different.

My optimism heightened during the first 30 seconds of the match, when I realized that I truly was much stronger than this scrawny punk. He was trying to make moves on me, but I was doing a decent job of fending him off. Twice I was awarded a point for an escape during the first round.

The unfortunate part of that, of course, is in order to earn an escape your opponent must have taken you down. Coach warned me against grabbing his shirt, which was instinctive based on my barroom wrestling



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You know, he didn't
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experience. As the round wore on, my lungs began to burn and I was having trouble keeping my arms up. I think the adrenaline of the battle, along with the fact that the human body is simply not designed to engage in a wrestling match without training, began to take its toll. When the whistle blew at the end of the first round, it was music to my ears. The score was only 4-2 at this point, but I was dizzy and exhausted.

I don't know why, but I envisioned a one-minute break between rounds similar to a boxing match. Maybe I could get some water, some pointers, spit in a bucket, whatever. Much to my chagrin, there are no breaks in wrestling.

Once the whistle blows, you must immediately assume the designated position and resume the match. I reluctantly took the down position to start the second round.

I managed to wiggle out of his grasp and stand up to earn my third point of the match. Tragically, this would be my last point earned in my wrestling career.

It's a good thing the video crew was there because I have absolutely no recollection of rounds two and three. I was exhausted and Corey sensed this. He seemed to have an array of moves designed to inhibit my breathing. I remember some sort of configuration where I was gasping for air and his little ass had one arm over my mouth and another around my lungs while digging his chin into my back. You know, he didn't smell that great, either – just an overall unpleasant situation.

Members of my entourage were yelling instructions that seemed logical but were impossible to execute. "Stand up!" "Don't reach back!" "Keep moving!" "Keep your arms up!" "Stay off your back!"

Even coach Kimpel, while refereeing, was yelling encouraging words, imploring me to dig deep and reminding me not to get pinned. The score, along with my heart rate, quickly got out of control. Mercifully, Coach Kimpel capped the score at 15-3. He later confided that the true score was more like 27-3.

AIR FORCE BASKETBALL 2006-07

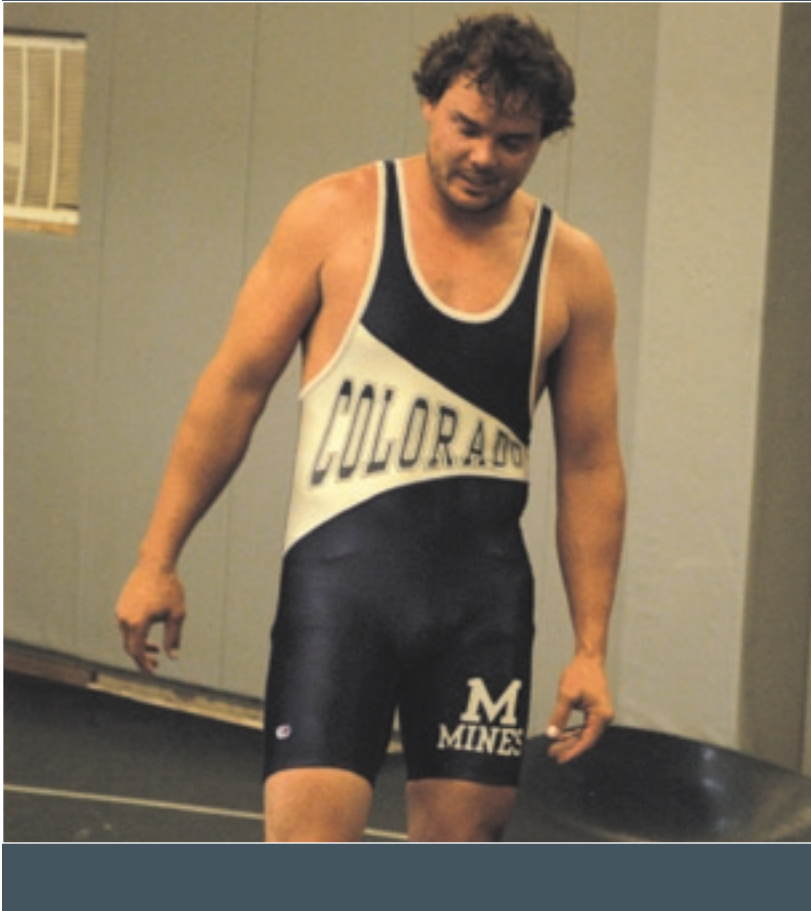
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After the match, I shook Corey's hand and congratulated him. He was certainly more formidable than he looked. Like most sports I have never participated in, there is much more strategy, technique and fitness involved in wrestling than I have ever imagined. When I watch accomplished athletes like Corey, they simply make it look easy. And when a layman watches, it just doesn't look that hard. Kind of like when my Grandma would join us watching an NBA game and sincerely ask, "Why doesn't that Michael Jordan just stuff it every time?"

Upon my disgraceful exit from the gym, I chatted with the rest of the team about my performance. They all had small bits of technical advice on what I could've done better. Probably the most poignant was, "If you ever wrestle again, you might want to get in shape."

I begin to wonder how I would fare against him when I was in my peak physical condition, say at age 25, which for some reason reminded me of my all-time favorite sports quote uttered from the exhausted lips of Larry Holmes after a fight late in his career. "You know, I'm definitely not the fighter I used to be."

I have always prided myself on learning from my experiences and mistakes – kind of living by trial and error. I seem to be always adding to the list. Some of my more recent observations: Always check if there's toilet paper *before* you sit down, never fry bacon when you're naked and for the love of God, don't ever wrestle a wrestler.

It's been a tough summer for the Jock. Beaten in a grueling three-set match by the defending women's state high school tennis champ, smoked by a full hour by Oprah in a marathon and now losing to a pubescent boy 70 pounds lighter than me in wrestling.

Most guys would be discouraged by these results. Good thing for you, my loyal readers, that I am not. Check me out in future issues when I box a female Golden Gloves champ, challenge one of Colorado's most famous golfers and mix it up with the babes of the women's pro beach volleyball tour. ■

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FOR SOME
FOOTBALL



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