

# Wrestling In The USA

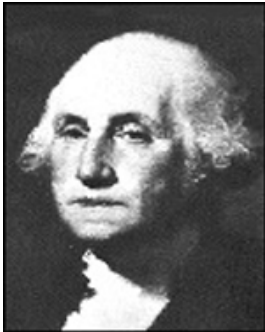
**By Bob Dellinger, Director Emeritus  
National Wrestling Hall of Fame**

**Note:** *This work draws its title from a series of columns by wrestling historian Donald A. Sayenga. Much of this information was obtained from *The Magnificent Scufflers* by Charles Morrow Wilson © 1959, and from *A Pictorial History of Wrestling* by Graeme Kent © 1968.*

Wrestling already was an established sport among the Native Americans in the 15th and 16th Centuries, when the first Europeans began arriving on the North American continent. Little has been handed down about the various styles practiced, but they are thought to have varied greatly from tribe to tribe. There was a common thread of savagery that typified the pursuits of warriors.

The English in the Colonies and the French in Canada made wrestling a popular sport at their social gatherings in early pioneer days. Before long, practically every settlement had its own champion, and there would be contests between various title-holders. The colonists started out with the Greco-Roman style, but it proved too dull and wrestling evolved into a more wide-open style.

During the 18th Century, wrestling appeared to have mellowed from its early ferocity into a legitimate spectator sport, a bit on the rough-and-ready side, but legitimate. It was the major physical contact sport among men of all classes (boxing did not catch on until near the end of the 19th Century).



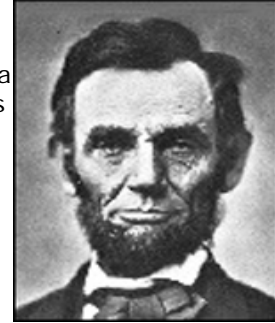
Perhaps the early finishing school for scufflers was the Rev. James Maury's Academy at Fredericksburg, Virginia, an institution which turned young gentry into scholars and, as in the case of young George Washington, into able wrestlers as well. At 18, the big, shy Washington apparently held a "collar and elbow" wrestling championship that was at least county-wide and possibly colony-wide. Washington never lost his touch. At the age of 47, ten years before he became the first President of the United States, the Commander of the Continental Armies still had enough left to defeat seven consecutive challengers from the Massachusetts Volunteers.

The "collar and elbow" style devised its name from the starting position. Standing face-to-face, each wrestler placed one hand behind his opponent's neck and the other behind his elbow. While doing away with such tactics as bull-like rushes, the position opened up many possible skill maneuvers.

Even more renowned for his wrestling skills was young Abraham Lincoln, who was the wrestling champion of his county as early as 1830, at the age of 21. Lincoln was an impressive physical specimen, thin but wiry and muscular, strengthened by hard work in the fields and towering to a mighty 6 feet, 4 inches in height.

It was at this time that Lincoln had his celebrated bout with Jack Armstrong, the local tough and county wrestling champion. Lincoln was keeping the store at New Salem, Illinois, when his boss backed him to out-wrestle the feared Armstrong. From the start, Lincoln proceeded to hand out a thrashing to the local champion. Frustrated by Lincoln's enormous reach, Armstrong started fouling his opponent. Lincoln stood it for a while, but eventually lost his temper. Picking up his opponent, the storekeeper dashed him to the ground and knocked him out. Armstrong recovered in time to keep his cronies from starting a free-for-all.

A couple of years later, while serving as captain of a company of the Illinois Volunteers, raised because of the Indian uprising by Black Hawk, Lincoln suffered his only recorded defeat in a wrestling bout. He fought a soldier from another unit and lost a rugged struggle by the odd fall. This time it was Lincoln who averted the free-for-all which seems of have been the customary follow-up to an individual wrestling bout.



Often forsaking the "common British" style of collar and elbow for the free-for-all style of the frontier, Lincoln undoubtedly was the roughest and toughest of the wrestling Presidents. Also known as "catch-as-catch-can," this style was more hand-to-hand combat than sport.

Lincoln progressed rapidly between the ages of 19, when he defended his stepbrother's river barge from Natchez thugs, throwing the potential highjackers overboard, and 29, when he cautiously mentioned himself as possibly the second best wrestler in southern Illinois. Lincoln certainly did not achieve any national fame as a wrestler, but his career was typical of the way the sport was conducted in the first half of the 19th Century.

It was also typical of the wrestling careers of the seventh President, Andrew Jackson; the 12th, Zachary Taylor; the 18th, Ulysses S. Grant; and the 21st, Chester A. Arthur. Taylor never wrestled against Lincoln, but he was a skilled competitor in collar and elbow during his service with the Illinois Volunteers for the Black Hawk uprising. He always favored wrestling as an army sport.

William Howard Taft, the heaviest wrestling President at his "best weight" of 225, was a lifelong follower of collar and elbow. Big Bill was intramural heavyweight champion at Yale, and was a fourth generation wrestler in the Taft family. He was the 27th President.



Perhaps the most enthusiastic of the wrestling Presidents was Taft's immediate predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, who continued regular wrestling workouts throughout his term as Governor of New York. Roosevelt, of course, had an affinity for most kinds of strong physical exertion. The 30th President, Calvin Coolidge, was rated "tolerable good" as a wrestler by his father, old Colonel John, until at around 14, Cal took to "duding around and daydreaming about being a big-city lawyer."

As the 19th Century drew to a close, "organized" wrestling competition began to appear, often as an additional feature of other sporting events, such as gymnastics meets or boxing tournaments among the sporting clubs of the day. The first national competition was conducted in 1887, with L. Chenoweth of the Pastime Athletic Club winning the only weight class, 134 pounds. The Amateur Athletic Union formally sanctioned its first national tournament in 1888, continuing through 1982.

The first collegiate athlete to win a national championship was Winchester Osgood, a football star at the University of Pennsylvania. He won the 1895 National AAU title in the "heavyweight" class (for competitors over 158 pounds). But the 20th Century would be well into its third decade before collegiate wrestlers established any true national presence. Until then, the sport was dominated by club teams such as the National Turnverein of Newark; the Schuylkill Navy Athletic Club, St. George's AC; Rochester AC; Pastime AC; Michigan AC; Chicago Central YMCA; Gary YMCA, Multnomah AC of Oregon, the Olympic Club of San Francisco and various ethnic groups such as the Norwegian Turnverein, German-American AC, Greek Olympic Club, Chicago Hebrew Association and Swedish-American AC.



The National Turnverein produced America's first true wrestling hero. George Nicholas Mehnert, competing at 115 or 125 pounds, won six National AAU championships from 1902-1908, losing only one of more than 100 bouts. He earned gold medals in the Olympic Games of 1904 and 1908, and that feat stood as an American record for 84 years. Mehnert's only loss was administered by George Dole, a student at Yale University, where collegiate wrestling was in its infancy. Dole also was an Olympic champion in the 1908 Games.

Under the leadership of such pioneer coaches as Charles Mayser at Yale, William "Billy" Sheridan at Lehigh, Dr. Raymond G. Clapp at the University of Nebraska and Hugo M. Otopalik at Iowa State University, wrestling began to gain a foothold in collegiate athletics.

But the driving force behind collegiate wrestling was young Edward Clark Gallagher at Oklahoma A&M College (now Oklahoma State University). A football and track star at A&M, he launched wrestling as a varsity sport just before World War I and built it into a dynasty during the 1920s. His teams were undefeated for 10 years, 1922-1931, and were virtually unchallenged.

When A&M played host to the National AAU tournament in 1925, Gallagher's varsity swept to the team championship. So total was his charges' domination, that the junior varsity and A&M's unattached entries placed second, far ahead of the rest of the field. Together the two groups won almost all of the medals.

College wrestling was here to stay, and the sport changed dramatically in 1928 with the first championship tournament of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Gallagher's wrestlers won four of the seven weight classes, and his Aggies were team champions for the first four years and 11 of 13. Except for a pause every four years to notice the Olympic Games, the spotlight remained fixed on collegiate wrestling for at least the next half-century.



The sport received a major boost in the mid-1950s when an Oklahoma journalist named Jess Hoke introduced a publication called Wrestling News and Reports. Renamed Amateur Wrestling News, it is in its fourth decade in print. By establishing the first line of communication among all aspects of wrestling in America, Hoke's small newspaper changed the face of the sport forever.

For most of the 20th Century, collegiate wrestling has been the most popular version of the sport in the United States, particularly in the Midwest (Iowa) and the Southwest (Oklahoma), and has been far more thoroughly documented than competition in the international styles. Dan Gable, the most prominent figure in American wrestling, won an Olympic gold medal at 149.5 pounds in 1972 and was Olympic freestyle coach in 1984. But he is far better known for his 100 victories as a collegiate wrestler at Iowa State University and his 350-plus victories and 15 national team championships as a collegiate coach at the University of Iowa.

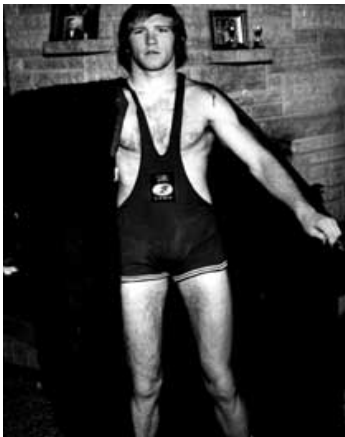
Not until the late 1970s did USA participation in the World Championships and the Olympic Games become fully publicized and respected. The first of the "new giants" was Leroy Kemp, who followed his three NCAA championships at the University of Wisconsin with three World titles and four gold medals in the freestyle World Cup at 163 pounds.



In 1986, a young man with the improbable name of John Smith burst upon the international scene at age 22 by winning a gold medal in the Goodwill Games, defeating the Soviet star in Moscow on worldwide television. Smith, who won two NCAA titles and 90 straight victories for Oklahoma State University, went on to win six consecutive world-level championships, including Olympic gold medals in 1988 and 1992 at 136.5 pounds. He was the first wrestler in 63 years to win the James E. Sullivan Award as America's greatest athlete, and eventually has become widely recognized as this country's greatest wrestler ever. He since has become a championship-winning coach at Oklahoma State.

Another of the modern super-achievers is heavyweight Bruce Baumgartner, who ruled America's freestyle heavyweights for 15 consecutive years, 1982-1996, and became the first USA wrestler to win four Olympic medals, gold in 1984, silver in '88, gold again in 1992, and bronze in '96. Smith and Baumgartner are the first American wrestlers since Mehnert, back in 1904 and '08, to win two Olympic golds.

Others regarded as "giants" of the sport in the United States include Robin Reed of Oregon State, a 1924 Olympic gold medalist at 134 pounds, who never lost a match to any opponent of any size; skilled technicians such as Stanley Henson of Oklahoma State and Bill Koll of Northern Iowa; Danny Hodge of Oklahoma, an athlete of incredible strength who pinned almost all of his opponents; and a New York policeman, Henry Wittenberg, who won more than 300 matches in a row and collected gold and silver medals in the Olympics.



Consider, too, Jack VanBebber, who won three collegiate championships for Oklahoma State and an Olympic gold medal in 1932 at 158.5 pounds, a combined achievement unmatched for more than 50 years. Brothers John and Ben Peterson from the state of Wisconsin each won an Olympic gold and an Olympic silver in the Games of 1972 and '76, a feat matched by Oklahoman Kenny Monday in 1988-92.

Two more wrestling brothers, Dave and Mark Schultz, also attained lofty goals, both winning Olympic golds in 1984. Dave won seven world-class medals in all, including a gold in the 1983 World Championships, three silvers and two bronzes. He was on line to return to the Olympics in '96, but was murdered in January of that year. Mark was a gymnast in high school, but when he took up wrestling, he won three collegiate titles at Oklahoma and two World crowns.

The Banach twins, Ed and Lou, captured five collegiate championships for Iowa and also won gold medals in the 1984 Olympics. Wade Schalles of Clarion University posted career totals of 821 victories and 530 falls, earning a listing in the Guinness Book of World Records as the sport's all-time winning and pinning leader.

Wrestling's "first family" is that of Rex Peery, who won three NCAA championships at Oklahoma State, then coached each of his sons, Hugh and Ed, to three championships at the University of Pittsburgh. All of these men except Baumgartner and Monday, who must wait five years after competition, have been honored as Distinguished Members of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

Even the Peery family's "title" is being challenged. John Smith's older brother, Lee Roy, was an NCAA champion and World silver medalist. In 1994, younger brother Pat became the first wrestler to win four NCAA championships. Lee Roy, Pat and youngest brother Mark each won two Junior National freestyle titles, and Mark's collegiate career is just under way.

In the early part of this century, professional wrestling was popular in the United States, reaching its peak in the 1920s and '30s. With the advent of television, professional "wrestling"

degenerated into a prearranged display of rough and tumble acting, and no longer is a competitive sport. The names of legitimate professional champions such as Georges Hackenschmidt, Frank Gotch, Farmer Burns and Ed "Strangler" Lewis have been obscured by today's circus antics.