

Olympic Trials

The Olympic Trials for the 2000 Olympics was an intense weekend of competition that only occurs every four years. Over one hundred of our nation's top athletes competed in Dallas, Texas to see who the cream of the crop is.

I still have vivid memories of my experiences at the 1988 and 1992 Olympic Trials. Among some of my victories were four wins against opponents who I grew up idolizing, Joe Gonzales and Barry Davis. It was an unusual situation to have to battle two wrestlers who had I had looked up to over the years in order to achieve my goals. Although I rarely think about my Olympic Trial matches, they truly are memories of a lifetime. Not just of my matches, but of all the hotly contested bouts to see who would represent our country in the Olympics. The Olympic Trials always brings the best wrestling out of our great countries best competitors.

The 2000 National Open was held in Las Vegas during the spring. The National Open is of paramount importance as it sets the seeds for the final Olympic Trials. History shows since 1984 well over 80% of the #1 seeds have made our U.S. Olympic Team. Watching the wrestling to determine who will come through the first two days of competition to try to knock off the #1 seed in the finals is just as exciting as the finals.

The 2000 National Open was very competitive and there was a lot of parity this Olympic Year, heading into 2000 Final Olympic Trials. Cael Sanderson reminds me of the position I was in in 1988. Sanderson had a barnburner with Gutches in the semis of National Open. He scored with numerous 1 point leg attacks. Gutches was able to secure a victory by ducking under a loose Sanderson front headlock and getting behind him to throw a 3 point standing gut wrench midway through second period. Gutches has a great duck. This reminds me of the duck under of Melvin Douglass and my college coach, John Fritz. These guys could duck under a limbo stick. Anyway, Sanderson will have his work cut out for him in the mini tournament, just to get another chance at Gutches, but you never know. That is what it makes our sport so exciting!

Heading into the 1988 Olympic Trials I was not the favorite. Joe Gonzales was already a multi-time NCAA Champion and had been 1984 Olympian and U.S. World Team Member many times. I was only a 21-year-old junior at Penn State, while Joe was a savvy veteran. I had made a big commitment to spring and summer freestyle training since I was in ninth grade. From March through July from 1982-1988 I trained daily and traveled regularly to many of the USA Wrestling Regional and Nationals Events. If you are a serious high school or college wrestler I encourage you to do the same!

Although I did not win my first USA National Championship until I was a senior in high school, I had been making steady progress. My senior year of high school was a big turning point for me as I trained almost every day, all summer in preparation to compete in the Junior Nationals in both styles and the Junior World Championships. Everything came together for me that summer as I achieved all the dreams I had imagined. I won both styles at Junior Nationals in dominating fashion (pin and technical fall in finals) and won the Junior World Championship, winning by tech fall in the finals. It was a memory of a lifetime.

Another important summer for me was leading up to the 1986 World Espoir Championships. I spent a couple weeks living with Dave and Nancy Schultz while training in Wisconsin. Dave only knew me a little and Nancy did not know me well, but they were willing to open their home to me. I simply called Dave and asked. I was determined to be the best and knew there was no better way than to learn from the best. Dave gave so much knowledge and inspiration to so many people. He was amazing and Nancy has been so strong and supportive in continuing to allow Dave's legacy to continue to touch the lives of so many in the wrestling community. My training with Dave went well, but what proved to be most valuable was my time between sessions talking to Dave and watching his collection of videotape. It truly helped me become a better student of the sport and I gained a deeper appreciation of video analysis. In addition to studying Dave's techniques and tactics, I studied Belaglozov and Fadzaev, two outstanding Russian competitors. Dave loaned me many of his tapes to take home, and I was well on

my way to becoming a student of the sport. Note: I wrote a 3 part series on video analysis in AWN last year that was very well received. Many of my ideas I shared with you were inspired from my time with Dave Schultz. The Dave Schultz Wrestling Club has a series of Dave's tapes for sale.

After my time with the Schultz family, I won the 1986 World Espoir Cup later that summer, but more importantly I was on my way to making my mark on the college and international circuit. Up to this point I had had a red shirt year and a mediocre freshman year. However, in 1987 I placed 3rd at the NCAA Tournament as a sophomore and never looked back, continuing to train diligently through the 1988 Olympic Trials. Every year immediately after folkstyle season I was on the mat honing my freestyle skills. I firmly believed I would make the 1988 Olympic Team. I was determined to achieve my goal.

In the 1988 Nationals I defeated many outstanding opponents on my way to the finals where I was beat by Joe Gonzales on a close call in sudden death. Thus, I entered the Final Olympic Trials as the #2 seed. I was still considered an underdog heading into final trials, as many experts figured Joe would be ready to peak at the final trials. However, they underestimated my determination and ability to learn from my mistakes. I had studied Joe extensively leading up to Nationals and was able to anticipate many of his shots. However, Joe was a takedown machine, one of the most dominant of all time. I think he still holds NCAA record for most career takedowns. He had such fluent motion, precise set-ups and quick level changes that he was able to score with many of his shots when we competed at Nationals. I did not control the tempo of the match very well. However, in the final trials I modified my tactics, focusing on implementing the aggressive style that had made me successful throughout my career. I work intensely to close the gap, work the head and control my underhook, while still paying close attention to what Joe was doing so I could counter his attacks. I believe I frustrated Joe in the final trials. In addition to scoring from my underhook multiple times, I was able to force Joe into numerous bad shots which I was able to counter and score with my reverse front headlock. I was also able to get Joe cautioned for passivity so I could get on top and score with my gut wrench. My strategy worked as I won two consecutive matches over Joe in the final Olympic Trials. I became the youngest member of that 1988 Olympic Team and I believe the youngest member since then (Paulson?). Over past 30 years or maybe much longer I believe Jimmy Carr was the only athlete younger than me to make U.S. Olympic Wrestling Team.

I leave you with some observations from the 2000 National Open. Work on your high single leg techniques. One of my summer camp high single gurus, Donn Ernst, likes to tell campers to "only go to your knees on Sunday". Too many wrestlers dive in on their knees and get stuck and/or scored upon. Sam Henson and Kerry McCoy both secured victory in finals with high leg attacks. It is a particularly valuable attack. Dave Schultz used to step on his opponent's foot to get high single. He did it to Nate Carr and many other great wrestlers.

Do not stand around near edge or let your opponent drive you off the mat. Many points were scored in Vegas with partial takedowns on the way out of bounds. Brandon Slay defeated Joe Williams with two excellent techniques on the edge of mat. He rolled through with a front headlock for two points and drove Williams off the platform with a powerful double leg for three points. In folkstyle many takedowns are scored when get you knock opponent on their butt near edge of the mat or capture his ankles on edge (example: 2000 NCAA Finals - sudden death takedown Pritzlaff over Heskett). On the other hand, take advantage of your opportunities to score on the edge of mat regardless of what style you are wrestling. The University of Iowa wrestlers score on edge of mat consistently, often because they wear their opponents down, causing them to relax near edge. Don't let this be you caught on your heels near edge of mat!

Finally, if you are a serious freestyle athlete, spend more time training on the mat in par terre position! That is where you have the most room to improve. Our country should completely dominate the world in wrestling and we do not primarily because we tend to be inferior mat wrestlers. Do not wait until you are done with college to develop your freestyle skills! By the time you perfect them you may be beyond your prime!