

INSIDE A PARIIAH

The implications of doing your thing

By Mary Lyle Weeks

Last Dec. 9 an OU senior wrestler walked to the orange and black mat in hostile Gallagher Hall for a championship match in the Oklahoma State Invitational Tourney. Though not extremely strong or quick, he was a skilled experienced wrestler—a two-time Big Eight champion.

Everyone expected him to defeat his relatively unknown sophomore foe, but sophomore Dwayne Keller of OSU beat him by a startling 15-0 score. Many who saw the match described the OU senior's loss as "unexplainable." The 1967-68 season didn't begin well for Bryan Rice.

The season—and his wrestling career at OU—ended in March when he left the team voluntarily just before the NCAA meet. His career totals of 52 wins and 16 falls places him fifth and eighth, respectively, among all OU

wrestlers. A few days before his withdrawal, wrestling at 130 pounds instead of his usual 123, he won his third conference title, a feat equaled by only twelve others in OU history. The chance to win that title came when he was reinstated following a disciplinary suspension from the team.

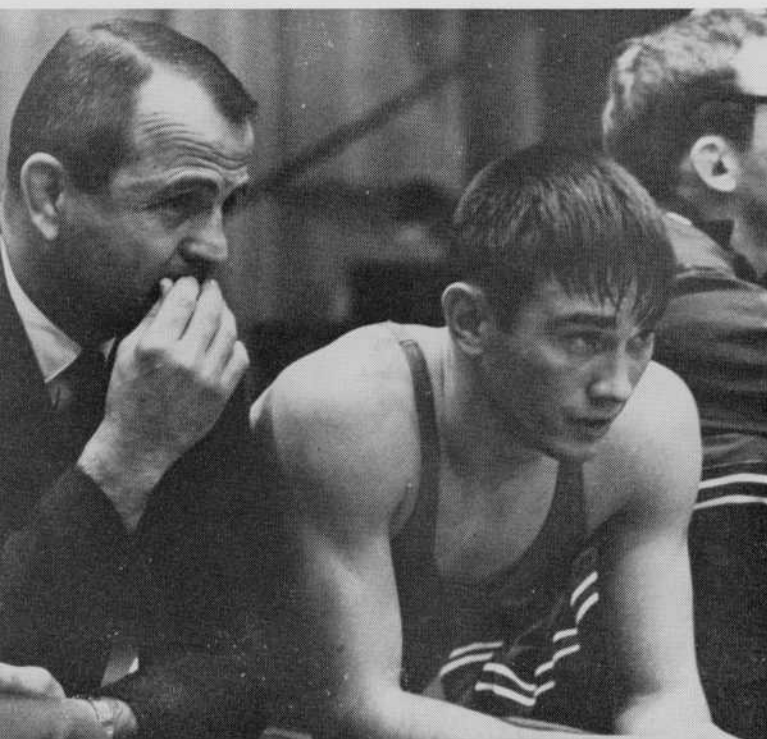
Rice's withdrawal from competition drew much criticism. Some people term it "unforgivable." They say the end of his career was even more unsatisfactory than his humiliating early season loss to Keller. In fairness, it must be pointed out that Keller ended an unbeaten season by defeating two-time national champ Rich Sanders (Outstanding Wrestler in the 1967 NCAA) to win an NCAA title. True, Sanders' injury, a pinched nerve in his neck, was aggravated in that match; temporarily he lost the use of one arm. Also true, you must be good to beat Sanders any time.

Maybe Rice's loss to Keller is not the humiliation it seemed at the time. Maybe too his decision to leave the team is not "unforgivable." For that decision, to some extent, is as explainable as a loss to Keller, who was named Outstanding Wrestler in the 1968 NCAA meet. It is a decision that seems to have significance beyond what it meant to Bryan Rice and the OU wrestling team.

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College athletes today are more intelligent, more concerned about life outside the arena. They live on campuses very different from those familiar to alumni of twenty or ten or even five years ago. Some alumni, geographically removed from and no longer oriented to those campuses (often depending upon the press to interpret activities there), see contemporary students as radicals, college members of the rebellions outlined by Dr. Louis West in November's Sooner Magazine. But as University College Dean J. R. Morris pointed out in the March issue, campus activists number only five percent. Observation at OU tends to support this.

Morris also said the "typical student does not seek visibility" and isn't "in any active way at war with the status quo." But he also observed that today's student rejects "knowledge without values, skills without purpose" and



Coach Tommy Evans and Rice conferring during happier days . . .

expects college to help him establish a philosophy of life. Therefore, though it may occur only silently in mind and heart, more students each day question the relevance and significance of status quo. Athletes live on campuses where this is happening, where non-conformity, if not heartily accepted, is not always condemned.

Yet for the most part, athletes conform—to each other, to the coach's goal, to a system that existed in Knute Rockne's day. The athlete, however individualistic, seeks success (i.e., winning) by adjusting to the pattern. This conformity is nourished by separate (and perhaps isolated) athletic housing. Isolation may be desirable for practical purposes, and conformity may be necessary because success (often measured by victories) is achieved in part by conformity—training, discipline, rules—including an unwritten rule: "If you accept an athletic scholarship, you give all (or appear to give all) until injured too badly to compete or until eligibility is completed."

The wrestler-athlete at OU does give all. Try to run the stadium steps three times (to row 72!) after wrestling two hours. Or run three miles daily. Or wrestle three eight-minute bouts against different foes in one workout session. In season, a wrestler isn't supposed to drink (not even beer) or stay up late (even to study); he hasn't the time to date that his friends have. To this, add pulling (losing) weight. Rice normally weighs 145; he wrestled at 123. To pull weight (you weigh in before each match) means you eat little food and you don't drink liquids, not even water.

The wrestler gives all and then some. Seeking success, he fits into the pattern, not necessarily a bad pattern, and yet what if that success loses its importance for him? Where is the line drawn between duty to school, coach, teammates—and obligation to self?

Bryan Rice drew the line; he broke the unwritten rule. Though he dislikes the word, he quit. Meaning, Rice "had done with, left, or departed from" wrestling. Though few asked him for explanation, his decision (like his season of difficulties) was detailed by newspapers and TV. Many people commented. Rice now tends to brush aside those comments but at the time he made a poignant observation: "A lot of people said a lot of bad things to me." Justified things? A phrase students have borrowed from the hippies gives a different viewpoint. Rice was "doing his thing." Meaning he did what was right for *him*.

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Rice doesn't look like a participant in protest marches—and he isn't. His hair falls across his forehead, college-style. Somewhat short (5-6) and of medium build, he dresses conventionally. He's no scholar ("I cut class too much," he admits, "and studying isn't the most interesting thing around") but neither is he a dummy-athlete who must be pointed at the cafeteria at mealtime. After a casual meeting, you might say he was quiet and unassuming.

At second look Rice always seems to grin, indicative of his sense of humor. Beyond that, complexities: a searching sort of look, an occasional introspective moodiness, an almost mischievous gleam in his eyes, revealing a side that earned him a campus reputation, be it true or false: "Bryan Rice? He's a swinger, baby, a real swinger!"

To understand his decision isn't easy, for it isn't easy to

know Rice. If you're his friend, he'll talk to you at length, with enthusiasm. He relates hilarious anecdotes about friends and teammates, mimicking gestures and voices. He'll give an opinion on anything from mandatory class attendance to Vietnam. Even a question about Bryan Rice brings a quick answer. But that answer is often superficial, evasive. He doesn't share private thoughts or emotions easily. In addition to the usual student reluctance to lose his cool, Rice seems to have a vulnerability that brings answers like: "Oh, I've never tried to figure out why I did that." Or: "My reasons wouldn't sound important or logical to you."

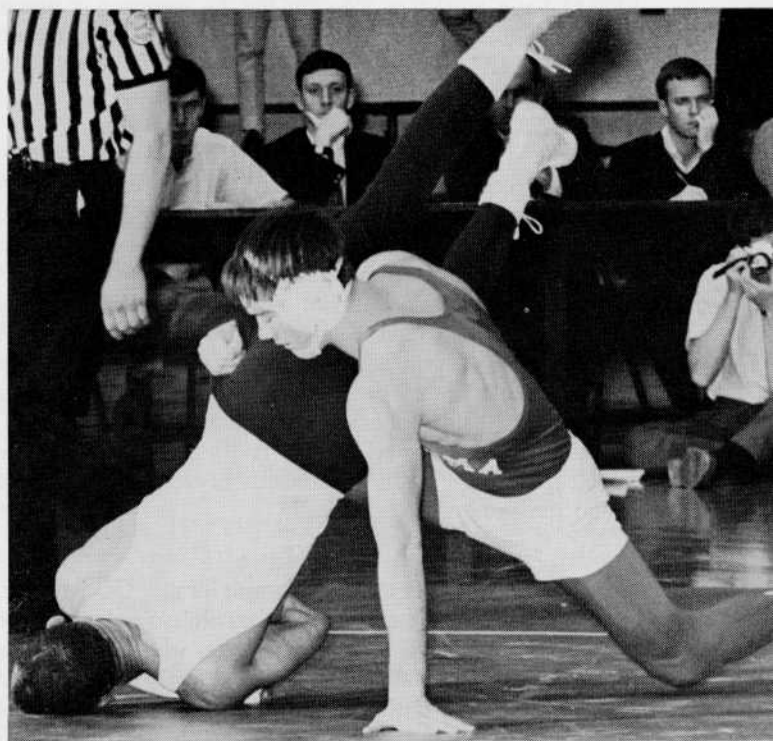
Of some things, he does speak with candor. Like the loss to Keller. "I felt helpless," he confesses, and, commenting on criticism of his seemingly "so what?" attitude after the match, he adds, "Sometimes you laugh to keep from doing something else."

On a spring night not long ago, when wrestling mats and the hurrahs and hisses of fanatic fans seemed far away, Rice talked frankly about wrestling. "It didn't mean as much this year. I only came out to help the team." He goes beyond that. "I took the scholarship because I needed financial help for college. If there'd been another way, I probably wouldn't have wrestled. If I had it to do over again, I'm not sure I would."

Moments later, eyes downcast as if to hide emotion, he refuted that. "I'd do it again." His voice, despite a matter-of-fact tone, conveyed a measure of sadness. "I got more out of wrestling than I put in." Looking up, he grinned. "I'll tell you—it was hard this year, feeling as I did, to live with Wayne." The grin faded; Rice shrugged. "If I have a regret, I regret I couldn't feel like Wayne did about wrestling."

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Wayne is Wayne Wells, 1968 NCAA champ, the OU



... Rice showing his skill during early bout in 1968 season.

wrestler with more wins (69) than any other. He and Rice, friends since high school, were roommates five of eight semesters. Wells is totally dedicated. To him, Rice is somewhat of a mystery. "I think Bryan will be sorry he quit," Wells said. "He's still my friend, but I don't understand what he did. He can beat Keller. Bryan could have been an NCAA champion."

Coach Tommy Evans, perhaps the most dedicated wrestler OU ever had and one of the most skilled, criticized Rice's decision immediately and sharply. "Bryan quit after we gave him a second chance," Evans said. "I feel he let himself, me, and the team down. I think I treated him fairly two weeks ago when the team asked me to let him return after suspension and I agreed."

Rice doesn't see it that way. With a grimace, he admits "what coach said hurt me a lot." He feels circumstances forced him to quit. "When I came back after suspension I never expected to wrestle in competition. If David McGuire hadn't entered the Big Eight at 137, I wouldn't have competed." On Monday after the Big Eight, Rice, who has trouble holding his weight, weighed 142. "I didn't expect to try out at 123 but coach wanted me to. He wanted me within three pounds or on flat weight (123). I never wrestled that light. By match time I'll be at 127-8. Also I'd have to have beaten Stan Keeley twice in a row. (To win a starting position, the challenger must win two out of two; the number one man needs to win only once). I didn't think that was fair. Even though Stan was considered number one at 123, he'd never beaten me."

Evans says challenge matches for twenty years have been within three pounds of or on flat weight. "Bryan had forfeited the number one spot. I had an obligation to Keeley too."

Before he quit, Rice discussed his feelings with Port Robertson, former head coach, now freshman coach. "I should have talked to Tommy but he was out of town. Port agreed—if my heart wasn't in it, I'd be better off to quit. If OU hadn't had a good 123-pounder, I'd have stayed, but I thought Stan could do as well as I could at the NCAA."

Rice had other reasons. "I'd have missed some tests—with my grades, I didn't need that." Also, after his suspension, he was moved out of the athletic dorm and barred from the cafeteria. He felt "I was getting farther and farther away from the team," an important factor in a close-knit wrestling squad. On that spring night, Rice said his presence wouldn't have changed OU's third-place NCAA finish. "I never won more than two matches there," he said, with a trace of the disgust and sadness so obvious when he lost as a sophomore. "If Stan had pulled to 115, I'd have gone, and maybe. . ." His voice trailed off; he shook his head. "If the circumstances were the same, I'd make the same choice again."

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If 1967-68 was a season of triumph for any OU wrestler, it was for Wells, the crowd favorite, always going for the pin—a dedicated, determined athlete who realized his dream on a snowy Pennsylvania night when he won an NCAA title. And if there was a personal triumph at the Big Eight meet, it was Rice's. For a month, due to his suspension, he'd wrestled only once in competition. More-

over, he was a virtual pariah, booted for his bad attitude and carousing. "I hope he does well," said an OU fan. Another retorted, "He won't. He's not big enough for 130. Anyway—he's forgotten how to gut it to win."

Rice knew critical eyes were on him. As he circled the dirt floor of Colorado's field house Friday night, he paused to talk to a friend. In the midst of pleasantries, Rice abruptly asked, half joking, half defensive: "You gonna chew me out for what I've done this season?" "No," came the response. "All I'll say is—if you want it enough, you can win your third championship here." "If I don't," he said, face grim, "it won't be for lack of trying."

In the semifinals Rice met Colorado's Pete Nord, a tough 130-pounder who finished fifth at the NCAA this year. Rice, the underdog, won 3-2. Before the finals, press table veterans assessed team chances, picking probable champions. At 130 OSU's Dennis Crowe got the nod over Rice. For though he beat Crowe 5-3 in early season, Rice had lost 1-4 the second time. Besides that, it hadn't been a good season for Bryan Rice.

The match was exciting, hard-fought, full of action. Final score, 10-7. The winner was the ex-pariah, the pariah-to-be, Bryan Rice. "I wanted that," Rice said softly on a spring evening. "In fact," he spoke with obvious if painful honesty, "those were the only matches I really cared about all year. But I wanted that third championship badly. I knew I'd beat Crowe when I walked out there."

Beat Crowe, fourth in the nation this year. Gut it to win. The 1968 Big Eight meet forever belongs to Bryan Rice.

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Athletics is part of college life, a part Rice has known well. Though his exit from the arena was unusual, perhaps as he said, "I did the best thing for my own interests." Or—as all men sometimes do—perhaps he made a mistake.

Opinions of Rice vary but—indisputedly—he made a choice. His choice reflects maturity in that he felt no need to live up to anyone's expectations of him. He is his own man. Nor was he different merely to be different. He made his own response to a situation and lived with it. Beyond that, if a student is to establish a philosophy of life, surely he must learn to think independently, an ability many professors strive to teach. They urge a student to question, to weigh values, and then—based on his knowledge and ethics and maturity—decide for himself.

To some, Rice's decision to quit is still a mistake, "unforgivable." But to others that decision fits phrases by the non-conformist Henry David Thoreau: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

Bryan Rice will not remain long in the spotlight. Controversy will die. "Bad things" will cease to be spoken. Bitterness and hurt will fade away. A wrestler's choice will be forgotten. One certainty will exist forever. A 22-year-old college student, who would be appalled to be designated a symbol of his generation, made a decision which reflects something rather hopeful in the mood and mind of that generation: Bryan Rice did *his* thing. He marched to the beat of his own particular drummer. ●