

WRESTLING



THE TOUGH SPORT

By Jim Weeks

Not too many years ago, a 157-pound wrestler invited a heavier football player to an unofficial session in the University of Oklahoma wrestling room.

After mauling the football player unmercifully, the wrestler declared in no uncertain terms:

"Don't forget. You're a football player, and I'm a wrestler."

The message was clear. Football players at OU may be better known, but wrestlers take a back seat to no one.

Even so, OU wrestling coach Tommy Evans isn't limited to local standards. Evans has won two national championships and was a runner-up in the Olympics as a competitor. He has coached national collegiate championship teams and the last United States Olympics team. He is a member of the Wrestling Hall of Fame.

OU's wrestling teams have ranked in the nation's top seven teams in each of the past 20 years, claiming six national titles and five in the past 20 years.

"When you talk about how good a wrestler is, you have to consider how good compared to what," said Evans, a solid 13 pounds over the weight he was when he won the national title 16 years ago.

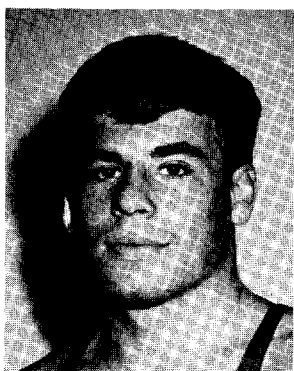
"When I talk about how good a wrestler is, I'm talking about how he compares in national competition. Our wrestlers are much better than average."

Still, Evans isn't predicting any kind of amazing comeback for Oklahoma's most successful athletic team.

The Sooner wrestlers placed sixth in the nation last season, their worst finish since 1954. That sixth



Cachero



Laush

place is no popularity contest. National ranking in college wrestling isn't determined by polls or computer evaluation. It's determined by a tournament in which the wrestlers and their teams place on the basis of actual competition.

An OU team coached by the 39-year-old Evans had never placed below fourth in the nation until last season. But wrestling is changing. It's the fastest growing high school sport in the nation. Although the Big Eight Conference with powerhouses OU, Oklahoma State and Iowa State is the nation's stronghold, the teams in the populous western states are closing the gap.

College wrestling has become a truly national sport. No longer can OU be a national contender with three-fourths or more of the squad from Oklahoma.

Evans still prefers to concentrate his recruiting within the state, but even his squads are beginning to reflect the national influence. Chances are only four of OU's 10 starters will be Oklahomans. The others are from Arizona, Virginia, Wyoming, Colorado and New York.

The Sooners' leading prospects this season are Mike Cachero, who placed third in the nation last season in his first year of major-college competition; Bill Beakley, who placed fifth in last year's NCAA Tournament, and Larry Laush, surprise Big Eight champion in 1969 and scholastically ineligible the second semester last season.

Cachero is a 5-foot-4, 118-pounder from Phoenix, Arizona, who won the national junior college championship before coming to OU last season.

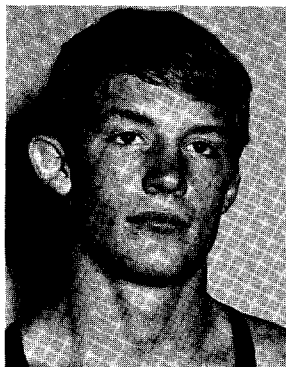
Beakley, 5-foot-8 junior from Tempe, Arizona, had a 15-5-2 record last season and placed third at 142 pounds in the Big Eight meet.

Laush, Big Eight titlist at 167 pounds in 1969 but a regular 158-pounder, is a throwback to the Sooner teams of the 1950s and early 1960s when the fall was the thing. The 5-9 senior from Cheyenne, Wyoming, has a college career record of 18-3-1, including seven wins by falls.

Other experienced wrestlers are Tommy Abercrombie, 126-pound senior from Norman who had a 17-7 record last season; Joe Boone, 134-pounder from Granby of Norfolk, Virginia, the nation's most prestigious high school wrestling team; Bill Speer, 150-pounder from Tulsa who has the unenviable task of replacing two-time NCAA champion Mike Grant; Tom Corbin, 167-pounder from one of Oklahoma's most prestigious wrestling schools, Oklahoma City John Marshall; Mike Brundage, who as a 190-pound freshman from Norman had a 10-12 record last season but weighs 235 pounds this season, and Bill Luttrell, 5-11, 265-pound Perry product and two-year regular who will have trouble regaining his heavyweight spot against Brundage.

Newcomers to the lineup are expected to be Clayton Wyse, product of Tulsa Webster who has spent the last two years in military service, and Jan Gray, sophomore from Valley Stream, New York, who will compete at 190 pounds if Brundage doesn't reduce to that weight.

Evans believes some other wrestlers may get into the lineup. They are Lester Seat, a junior-college transfer with a fabulous high school career at Perry who could compete at 126; David Rankin, a freshman from



Abercrombie



Beakley

Oklahoma City John Marshall whose unorthodox style promises to be exciting; Mike Gilpin, a conservative freshman from Tulsa Kelley who may compete at 150 until Speer reaches the weight; Jack Harris, 167-pound senior from Tulsa Hale lacking mainly in experience; Ken Praytor, 177-pound sophomore also lacking experience, and Bill Struve, 250-pound junior who could develop.

Interestingly enough, OU has had an NCAA champion each year since Evans recovered from a knee operation to claim the 147-pound title and the award as the nation's outstanding wrestler in 1954.

Jim Weeks, a 1956 OU School of Journalism graduate, has worked on papers in Texas, Kansas and Ohio and now is sports editor of the Norman Transcript.

Mike Grant, who could whip his weight in wildcats, continued that streak last season and claimed 69 wins in his collegiate career, tying the OU record set by Wayne Wells in 1968.

If the streak is to be continued, Laush may be the best bet to do it. "He looks better than I've seen him look," Evans says. "He's a hustler and is aggressive. He makes mistakes but he overcomes them with desire."

Cachero, who Evans says has experience and quickness going for him, also must be considered a contender. He posted a 20-8-1 record last season, but five of those setbacks came against NCAA champion Greg Johnson of Michigan State and national runner-up Ray Stapp of Oklahoma State.

The trouble is both Johnson and Stapp return this season.

Evans thinks Beakley "will place real high in the nationals." Abercrombie is described as "one of the best competitors on the team."

Boone, who had trouble making weight and coping with the caliber of competition, receives some of the highest praise from Evans.

"Joe is real outstanding," the OU coach said. "He knows more wrestling than anyone else on the team. He's willing to work and learn as much as he can."

Evans calls Speer "a darkhorse—he needs experience, but he's a well-rounded wrestler."

Evans believes Wyse could play an important role in the Sooner's season, but he points out, "he needs to wrestle more and get into the routine of being a wrestler" after two years in the service.

Gray must learn better techniques and not rely on his superior strength so much, Evans said.

The OU coach believes Luttrell is capable of placing among the top three heavyweights in the nation. "He's tougher than he thinks he is and needs confidence," Evans said.

Brundage could be greatly improved in a year of apparently no outstanding heavyweights. "He has the height and reach to be a good heavyweight," said Evans.

"We'll be a little bit stronger than last year," Evans said in an over-all evaluation. "We're smaller at the higher weights, but we have fairly tough wrestlers at each weight. I think our fans will enjoy watching this team."

Evans is very aware of the fan support OU wrestling has had recently. When he was a competitor at OU, the crowds were small and not as knowledgeable. Now because of the Sooners' success and an understanding improved by high-school exposure, the fans have a better appreciation.

OU's schedule includes two dual meets with Oklahoma State, odds-on favorite to win everything in 1971; two dual meets with Iowa State, NCAA champion the last two seasons, and a dual encounter with Michigan State, the only team given much of a chance to halt Oklahoma State's resurgence to the top.

Even before OU enters the NCAA Championships at Auburn, Alabama, late in March, the Sooners will have faced the nation's best.

Evans wouldn't have it any other way no matter how the won-lost records reads.

Dec. 5	Athletes in Action at Norman
Dec. 14	Northern Colorado at Norman
Jan. 9	at Oklahoma State
Jan. 12	at UCLA
Jan. 13	at California Poly
Jan. 15	at Oregon
Jan. 16	at Portland State
Jan. 23	Michigan State at Norman
Jan. 28	at Northern Colorado
Jan. 29	at Colorado
Jan. 30	Air Force Academy Tournament
Feb. 4	Ohio University at Norman
Feb. 13	at Southern Illinois
Feb. 15	at Iowa State
Feb. 20	Oklahoma State at Norman
Feb. 26-27	Big 8 Championships, Lincoln, Neb.
March 6	Iowa State at Norman
March 12-13	NCAA Regionals at Iowa State
March 25-27	NCAA Championships at Auburn