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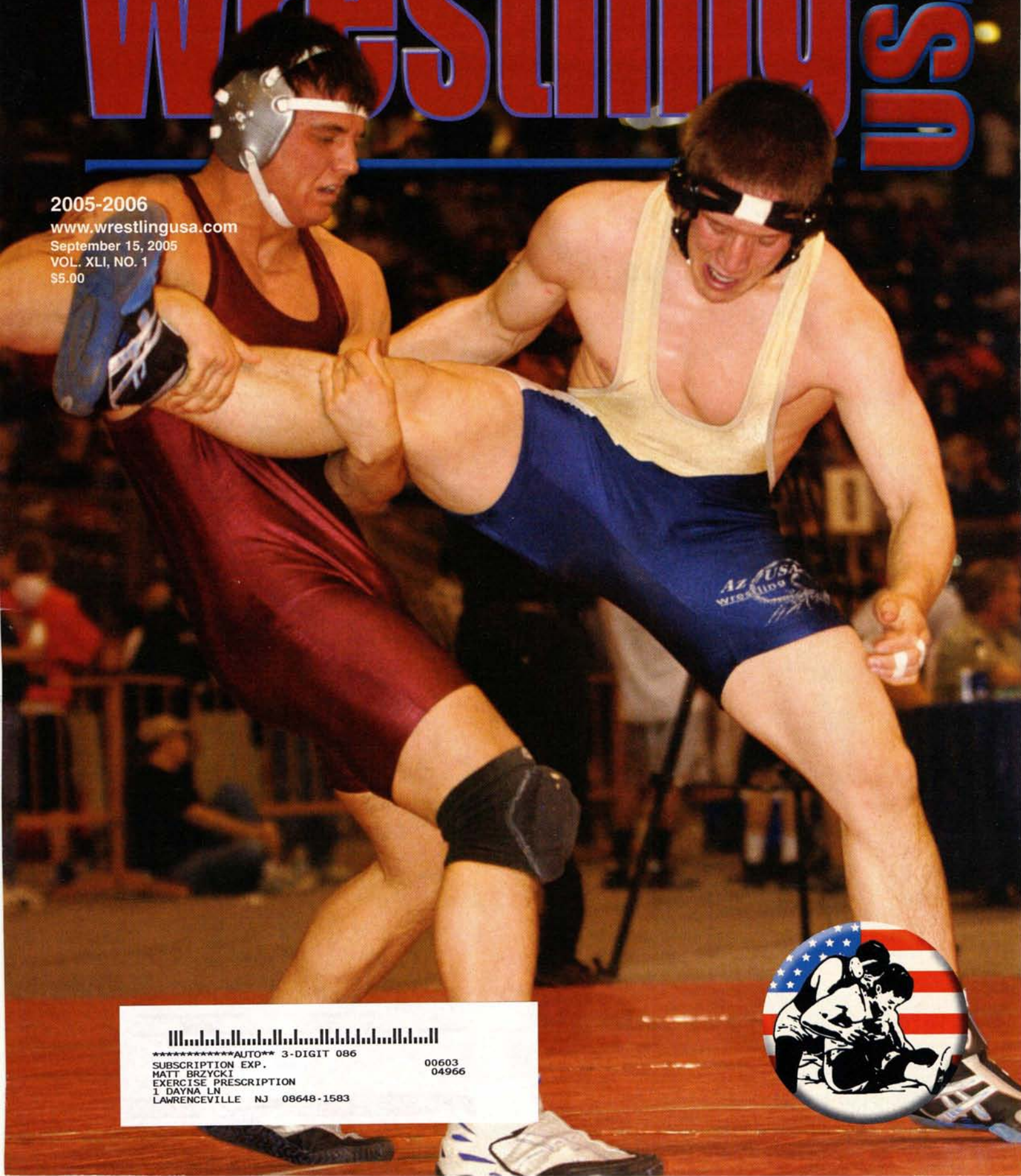
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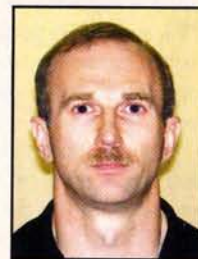
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Tales from the Weight Room - Part I

By Matt Brzycki



I have had the opportunity to train collegiate wrestlers at three different universities, beginning in September 1982 as an undergraduate student at Penn State. As part of a 10-week practicum, I helped Paul Kennedy (who was the Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach at Penn State) work with the wrestlers in the weight room in Rec Hall.

In working out the athletes, we used a system that is now known as "high-intensity training" or by the more popular acronym of "HIT." This type of training has many variations but one common denominator is that athletes are asked to do relatively few sets of each exercise – often only one – but with a very high level of intensity (or effort). This is characterized by performing each set to the point of muscular fatigue (that is, where no further repetitions are possible). Often, this is followed immediately by several post-fatigue repetitions (negatives or breakdowns) that are administered by a training partner or coach. Needless to say, the workouts are very demanding. I fondly remember the intensity, dedication and work ethic of many Penn State wrestlers such as Carl DeStefanis (an NCAA champ at 118 in 1984), Eric Brugel (an All-American at 167 in 1984) and others.

Very soon after graduating from Penn

State in May 1983, I was hired as a Health Fitness Supervisor at Princeton University and worked in the fitness center throughout the summer. When classes resumed in September 1983, I introduced myself to a group of wrestlers who were in the weight-room area of the fitness center. With their no-nonsense attitudes, the wrestlers stuck out from most of the other users of the facility. (The entire campus community used the facility, not just the varsity athletes.)

I still recall vividly that first encounter. We spoke briefly in the weight room but, because of the noise and other distractions, decided to transition to another area of the fitness center that had a section of wrestling mat which was used as a stretching area. On the way to the mat, we had to navigate around equipment and people who were exercising. It pretty much looked like a conga line of about a dozen people with me at the end. We were about halfway to the mat when the wrestler in front of me came to a dead stop right near the head of someone who was lying on a sit-up board. Now, the sit-up board was part of an old-style Universal Gym. The board could be positioned in five different holes that were bored into one of the machine's vertical support columns. The higher you positioned the board, the more difficult it became to do sit-ups. Well, this guy either

just got done doing sit-ups with the board flat on the floor – the easiest position – or was about to do the exercise. The wrestler bent down close to the guy's face, threw up his arms in the air in disgust and barked, "If that's the way you're gonna do sit-ups, why do them at all?" Then he continued on toward the mat and the rest of the team. The wrestler did not act as if he knew the guy on the sit-up board. Two things quickly crossed my mind: (1) this is one intense wrestler and (2) I am going to enjoy working with this group of athletes.

I soon learned that the name of the wrestler was John Orr. To this day, he is one of the most intense individuals that I have ever seen in my life. This includes the military personnel that I saw during the four years that I served in the Marine Corps prior to Penn State. And believe me, there is no shortage of intense people in the Marine Corps. Johnny was a two-time NCAA All-American (at 142 pounds in 1984 and 1985). He was a fierce competitor who was so serious when he wrestled or trained that it was almost scary. I do not ever remember seeing him smile when he was in college. In fact, I never knew that he had teeth until I ran into him years later. In the 1983-4 season, his only loss came in the NCAA finals (which were held at the Meadowlands in New Jersey) to a human takedown machine named Jesse Reyes of Cal State Bakersfield. The next year, Johnny dislocated his thumb very early in the season. He wrestled the rest of the year with his thumb taped to his hand. Nevertheless, Johnny again made it all the way to the NCAA finals in Oklahoma City where he lost to Joe Gibbons of Iowa State (a four-time state champ in high school and four-time NCAA All-American) by a score of something like 4-3.

Johnny was a natural leader and served as captain of the team as a junior and senior. He was not a big guy – his natural body-weight was probably no more than the low 150s. Yet, everyone on the team feared his



Princeton NCAA All-American Dave Crisanti (at 118 in 1986) spotting teammate and two-time NCAA second-place finisher John Orr (at 142 in 1984 and 1985) in a front raise with manual (partner) resistance. (1984; photo by Chet Dalgewicz.)

wrath. If Johnny announced that he wanted everyone to meet for a team run at 2:15 in the morning on the corner of Broad Street and Pattison Avenue in Philadelphia wearing a snorkel, then everyone was there. On time. And with requisite headgear. And if you were not there – on time and with requisite headgear – then you had to answer to Johnny Orr. And you did not want to answer to Johnny Orr.

In the weight room, I have always recommended that athletes work out in pairs as training partners: one as a lifter and the other as a spotter. By training in pairs, the spotter can encourage and motivate the lifter to work harder. The most intense way is for the spotter to take the lifter through the entire workout. Then, they switch roles so that the lifter can “return the favor.” Johnny’s usual training partner was Dave Crisanti, another NCAA All-American wrestler (at 118 pounds in 1986) and a two-time EIWA champion (1984 and 1986). Dave was incredibly disciplined and, as they say, as serious as a heart attack. He is another guy who I never remember smiling. In the finals of the 1986 EIWA Championships, he beat the great Jack Cuvo of East Stroudsburg State University – a two-time NCAA champion (at 118 pounds in 1988 and 1989) and three-time EIWA champion with a career record in college of 164-7. A little-known fact is that Jack set a national record for 18-year-olds in the 10,000-meter run and was a two-time NCAA All-American in cross country (Division II). So it is no surprise that, at the time, he was considered by many to be the most highly conditioned wrestler in the country. Interestingly, Dave beat him in overtime where you would expect the most highly conditioned athlete to have an advantage.

I recall once taking Dave through a workout and spotting him on a set of the bicep curl using manual (partner) resistance. He was doing the exercise with one arm at a time, grasping the middle of a small wooden bar that was maybe a foot long while I held the ends of the bar and gave him resistance. His intensity during the exercise was maniacal. This was pretty typical, though, since Dave always put every last ounce of energy into his sets. He held nothing back. When Dave completed the exercise with his second arm, I let go of the bar. He took it, screamed an expletive at the top of his lungs and literally threw the bar halfway across the weight room. This sent several people scrambling to avoid getting hit with the bar but no one complained about the incident. Everyone pretty much stayed out of Dave’s way. And that was a good thing.

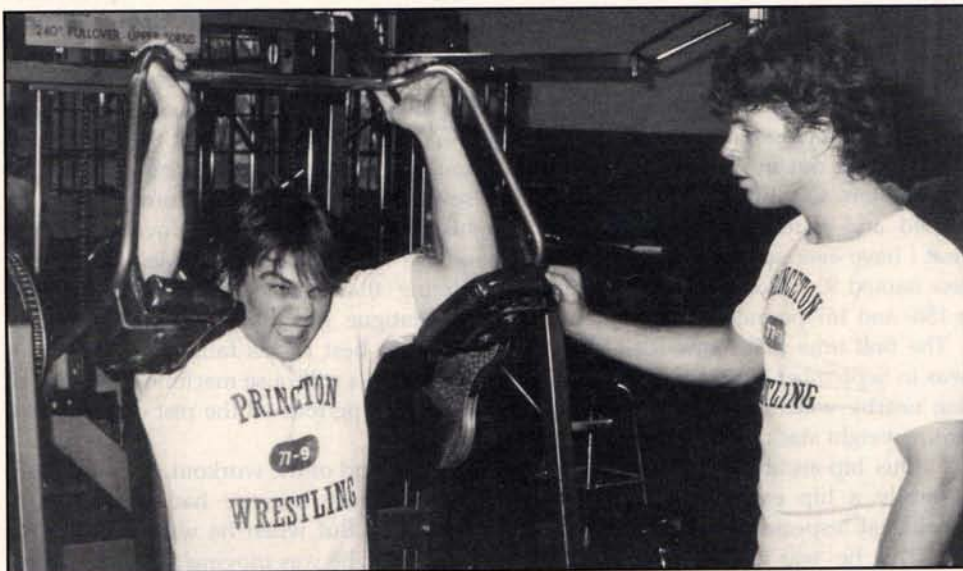
I do not think that either Johnny or Dave particularly enjoyed strength training but


they did it. And as I have noted, they did it very intensely. I know for a fact that Dave hated to do strength training. However, I cannot recall either of them ever missing a scheduled session of strength training and they were all business in the weight room. And here is a take-home message for younger wrestlers: Neither of them cared about how much they could bench press or how big their biceps measured. They were not in the weight room to swap stories or pose in front of a mirror. Their sole purpos-

es were to improve the strength of their muscles, bones and connective tissues to decrease their risk of injury and increase their potential to become the best wrestlers possible.

At this juncture, let me take a moment to make something clear: By mentioning the names of these (and other) athletes, I am in


Princeton wrestler Tim Kernan spotting teammate Rick Rochelle on a pullover with a machine. (1984; photo by Chet Dalgewicz.)






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no way taking credit for their performance on the mat. Anything that they accomplished in wrestling was strictly the result of their efforts, not mine. In my opinion, strength coaches give themselves far too much credit for the performance of their athletes. But the athlete is the one who has to lift weights, run laps, learn skills, make weight, don a singlet, lace shoes, buckle up headgear, step onto the mat and perform – not the strength coach. Early in my career, Paul Kennedy once gave me this advice: “Don’t take credit when they [the athletes] win and don’t blame yourself when they lose.” Enough said.

Over the years, I have seen literally thousands of athletes from many different sports work out in weight rooms and fitness centers. One of the most highly conditioned and hardest working individuals that I have ever seen was a Princeton athlete named Rick Rochelle who wrestled as a 158- and 167-pounder.

The first time that I saw Rick work out was in September 1983. I remember standing nearby watching him use almost the entire weight stack (200 pounds) on an old Nautilus hip-and-back machine (which is basically a hip extension). This was no small feat, especially for someone of his size. As he was approaching muscular

fatigue, I moved closer to the machine and was about to tell him where to go for his next exercise. But before I could finish my sentence, Rick tore off the waist belt, sprang up from the machine and ran full speed . . . and I mean full speed . . . about 30 feet to a leg-curl machine with his training partner in hot pursuit. The other people in the weight room quickly – and wisely – got out of Rick’s way. He literally threw himself onto the machine and instantly began to do that exercise. I was speechless. To this day, I have never seen anyone else do that. Never. While I have seen many individuals move quickly between exercises, I never saw anyone actually run as fast as possible. After one set of the leg curl to muscular fatigue followed immediately by several post-fatigue repetitions courtesy of his training partner, Rick dove a few feet onto a leg-extension machine. After completing that exercise followed by some post-fatigue repetitions, he ran about 50 feet – as best as his fatigued legs would allow – to a calf-raise machine. And that is how Rick performed the rest of his workout.

By the end of the workout, his mad dash between each exercise had slowed to a quick jog. But when he was not actually exercising, he was moving as fast as possi-

ble. That workout lasted about 30 minutes and he was an absolute mess when he was finished. Rick was soaked with sweat and his hair was matted to his head. He truly looked as if he was caught outside in a torrential downpour without an umbrella. It was not a pretty sight. Afterwards, I asked him where he learned how to train in that manner. Rick told me that he was taught this way at Dan Gable’s intensive wrestling camps. And this is the way that I always saw him do his strength training.

Most people who watched Rick work out were more than impressed – they were frightened. With his super-high level of intensity, he “took over” the weight room. Let me also say that he was an exceptionally strong individual. For example, at a natural bodyweight of about 170 pounds, Rick could do at least 12 repetitions of the leg extension on the old Nautilus compound-leg machine with nearly the entire weight stack of 250 pounds. And it had a ton of friction – nowhere near as smooth as the machines of today. So 250 pounds on that old-style machine actually felt much heavier than 250 pounds on a modern machine.

Rick not only had extraordinary strength, he also possessed a very high level of cardiovascular fitness. One time during the season, I remember that Rick came to the

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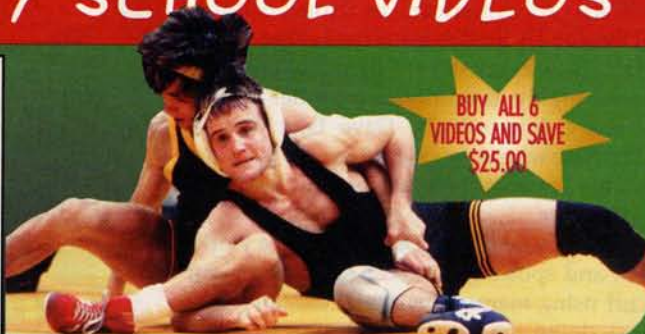
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fitness center to perform some "cardio" work. He pedaled a stationary bicycle as hard as he could for 10 minutes. Then he immediately dropped to the floor behind the bicycle and pedaled with his arms for 10 minutes! After this, Rick got back on the seat and again pedaled with his legs for 10 minutes. Then he pedaled with his arms for another 10 minutes. Rick ended up pedaling for a total of 60 minutes: 30 minutes with his legs and 30 minutes with his arms. I should also say that no one told him to do this - he did it entirely on his own. Amazingly, his heart rate dropped to the 40s in a matter of minutes. (Rick's resting heart rate was usually in the upper 30s.)

Another story that I recall from September 1983 was when I took Bill Eville - a freshman 118-pounder - through his first workout of HIT. After performing about eight exercises, he sat down to do the seated press, looked at me and said, "Sir, I think I'm gonna lose it." This, of course, meant that he thought he was going to vomit. I patted Bill on the shoulder and said, "Son, do what ya gotta do." Well, he left for a few minutes, apparently did what he had to do, came back and finished the rest of his workout.

There was no shortage of other intense and purposeful athletes on the Princeton

Wrestling Team in the early 1980s. I remember guys like Rob Garwood, Grady Grissom, Tim Kernan, Shannon Malloy and Eric Pearson (who would later coach the team for one season in 1996-97). By the way, I do not mean to slight any other wrestlers with whom I have had the pleasure of working. It is just that I remember some athletes and their workouts more vividly than others.

During June 1984, many Princeton alumni came back to campus for their annual class reunions. I was working in the weight room at the time and one person stuck out like a sore thumb. This guy was doing some serious HIT. He performed every set to muscular fatigue and moved quickly and purposefully between exercises. But what really raised my eyebrow was that after he did a set of chins to fatigue, he did several negative-only repetitions (using a stool to climb up to the mid-range position with his chest against the bar and then lowering his body in 6 - 8 seconds per repetition). Back then, the only people that I knew who trained in such a fashion were Princeton wrestlers and Penn State athletes. He was a little older and I knew he was not a member of the Princeton Wrestling Team. However, he resembled a guy named Steve Sefter who played foot-

ball and was an All-American wrestler in 1981 as a heavyweight when I was at Penn State. (Steve earned All-American honors again in 1985.) I had been told that Steve had a brother who wrestled at Princeton in the late 1970s. So I went up to the guy and with absolutely no introduction said, "Either you went to Penn State or you're John Sefter." He looked at me incredulously and said, "Yeah. How did you know?" I told him how I figured it out and he laughed. (For the record, John wrestled as a heavyweight for Princeton and lost in the 1978 NCAA finals to Jimmie Jackson - a three-time NCAA Champion from Oklahoma State.) Obviously, his strength training was heavily influenced by what his brother did at Penn State.

Matt Brzycki has authored, co-authored or edited 13 books on strength and fitness including Wrestling Strength: The Competitive Edge, Wrestling Strength: Prepare to Win and Wrestling Strength: Dare to Excel. The three wrestling books are available at all major bookstores or through Cardinal Publishers Group (800-296-0481).

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