

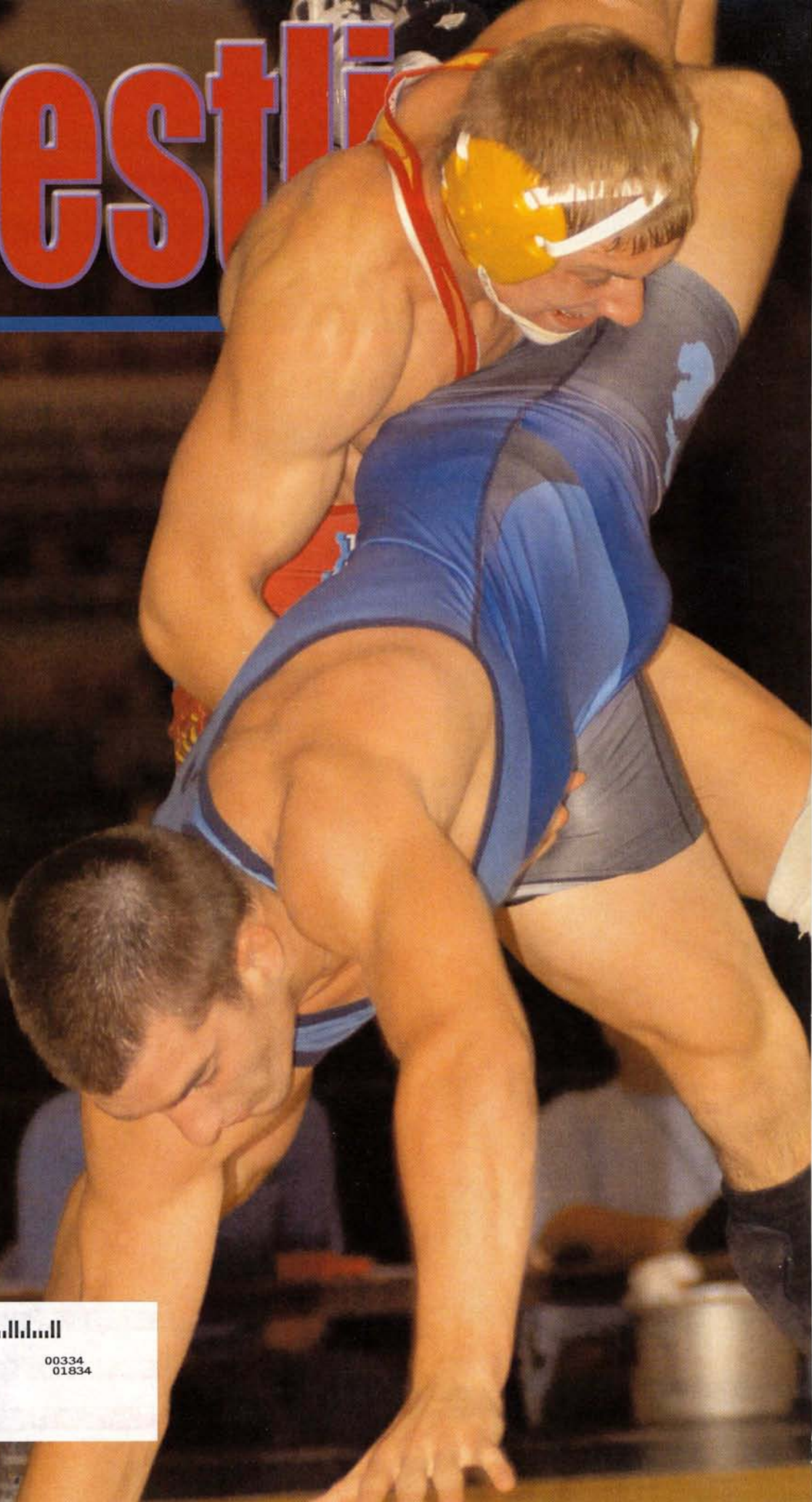
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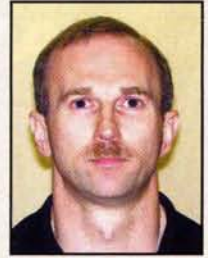
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Tales from the Weight Room - Part II

By Matt Brzycki



In the early part of 1984, Paul Kennedy was named the Strength and Conditioning Coach at Rutgers University. That summer, Paul offered me a position as the Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach and I left Princeton near the end of July to join him. My main responsibility was to manage the varsity weight room in the College Avenue Gym. In addition, Paul assigned me to work directly with the wrestling team.

Shortly after starting my job at Rutgers, I met Andy Foltiny who was the Assistant Wrestling Coach. Andy had wrestled at Rutgers as a 118-pounder from 1974-78, captaining the team during his senior year. He and I began training together in March 1985 and continued to do so until July 1990. Andy was about 5'4" and usually weighed in the neighborhood of 135 - 140 pounds. He is the only person that I have ever seen who could perform negative-only chins with more than twice his bodyweight. (To do negative-only chins, you climb up to the mid-range position where your chest is against the bar and lower your body in 6 - 8 seconds per repetition). Andy once did 8 negative-only repetitions - at a legitimate 8 seconds per repetition - with his bodyweight plus an additional 158.75 pounds around his waist. Just to be clear: With the extra resistance, this made Andy weigh nearly 300 pounds.

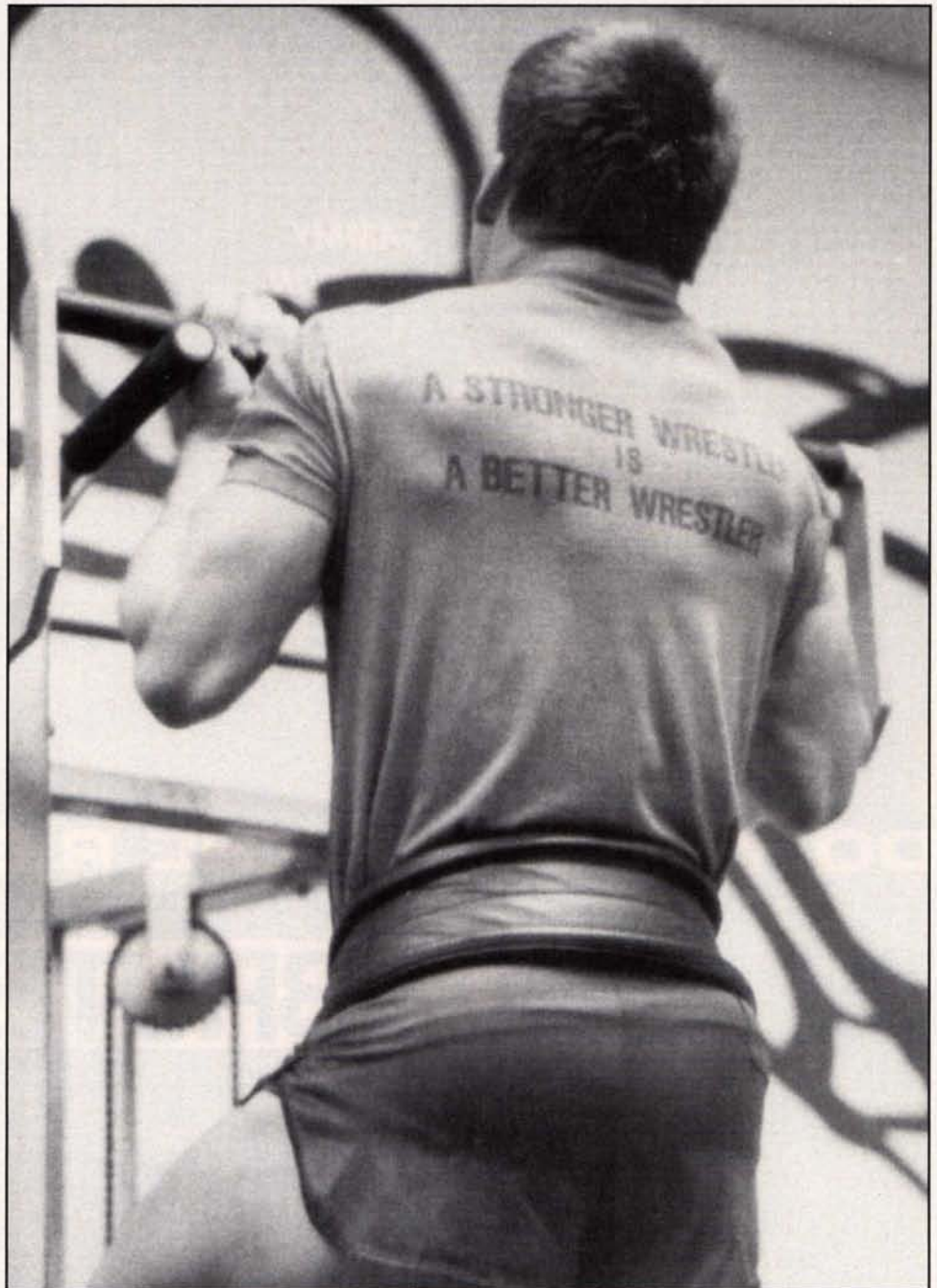
A wrestler who ranked right up there with the most highly conditioned athletes that I ever saw was Joe Shannon of Rutgers. In December 1985, a physician measured Joe's resting pulse at 43 beats per minute. I know this for a fact because Joe showed me the recording of his electrocardiogram. His efforts were relentless in the weight room and on the wrestling mat. On several different occasions, referees of Joe's matches came over to the coaching staff and said, "This guy's like a machine." No lie.

One year as a demonstration for our freshmen wrestlers, Joe - who had served briefly in the Army prior to college - went through a workout in the weight room while wearing a heart-rate monitor. He did 17 exercises - one set each to muscular fatigue - in 30 minutes and 34 seconds (which was actually 18 sets because one exercise was done with one leg at a time). Once Joe began his lower-body exercises - he started with four neck exercises - his heart rate remained between 160 - 180 beats per minute for the entire workout. It was

an incredible demonstration of metabolic conditioning. Besides moving as quickly as possible between sets, Joe used fairly heavy weights. After seeing Joe work out, more than a few guys decided that they did not really want to be part of the wrestling team. I am not exaggerating. After going through one of the workouts in the weight

room, a large number of others decided that they did not really want to be part of the team, either. So strength training served as a bit of a weeding out process: A good number of athletes showed up for strength

Rutgers wrestler Tom O'Rourke doing chins with extra weight. (1985; photo by Matt Brzycki)



training in the early part of September but, little by little, many of them quit the team before the first day of practice in October.

During one brutally hard workout, Joe started by doing the hip-and-back machine followed by the leg-curl machine – one set of each to muscular fatigue. His next three exercises – again, one set of each to muscular fatigue – were the leg extension, leg press and negative-only leg extension. (To do negative-only repetitions, his training partner and I raised the weight to the mid-range position and then Joe lowered it in 6 - 8 seconds per repetition). The leg extension and leg press were done on an old Nautilus compound-leg machine where you could do both of the exercises without having to move your butt. It probably took Joe less than four minutes to do those three exercises (the leg extension, leg press and negative-only leg extension). When he was finished, he stepped off the machine and his legs immediately buckled. Joe literally fell to the floor on his hands and knees in a messy heap. I mean, he dropped like a bomb from a B-2. Joe pulled himself to his feet, took a step and fell down again. He tried it one more time with the same results. Figuring that after three attempts he would not be able to maintain an upright posture, he crawled on his hands and knees across the floor of the weight room over to his next exercise (which was a bench press with a barbell). Imagine training so hard that you actually cannot walk

without collapsing.

I took Joe through a workout once and, near the end, he had to do a 60-second dip with additional weight. (To do a 60-second dip, you take 30 seconds to raise yourself and then 30 seconds to lower yourself). At the time, we did not have a special belt to add resistance so I inserted a rope through the hole of a 10-pound plate and he put it around his neck like a medal. I kept Joe abreast of the time by counting cadence out loud. In other words, I said, "ten... nine... eight..." and so on. Well, when I said "two," Joe let go of the dip bars, removed the 10-pound necklace, threw it on the floor, uttered a few profanities and walked toward the door while shaking out his arms. I stayed back at the dip bars and said, "Joe, you still have two more seconds to go." With that, he stopped dead in his tracks, turned around, ran toward me, scooped up the 10-pound plate without breaking stride, put the rope between his teeth, got back on the dip bars and finished the last two seconds of the exercise. Picture that: A guy doing a dip with a rope between his teeth that held a 10-pound plate.

Joe's usual training partner was Tom O'Rourke. (Both of them were team captains during their senior years). Tom was another guy who was very aggressive in the weight room and, pound-for-pound, was one of the strongest individuals that I have ever seen. After one of his first work-

outs, Tom struggled up a set of stairs that were outside the weight room, exited the gym and began to walk to his apartment. After about two blocks, he had to stop walking because he was so tired. Tom sat on a curb for a bit, leaned over and vomited. Then he had to lie down on the curb. Eventually, Tom recovered enough to walk again. When he reached his apartment, he lied down in bed and folded his arms across his chest because it was too painful to stretch out his arms. He finally got up the energy to shower. Tom told me that after working out, he often was afraid to drive a car because of the uncontrollable and inevitable post-workout shaking and trembling – he did not think that he could apply his brakes.

Anyway, I would have paid money to see Joe and Tom train each other. From watching them go through a workout together – which was incredibly savage and ruthless – you would think that they were worst enemies instead of best friends. They were downright sadistic to each other. During negative-only repetitions, the spotter counted out loud an eight-second cadence. Well, the spotter purposely miscounted on a regular basis thereby prolonging the agony of the lifter. As Tom lowered a weight, for example, Joe might count something like this:

"Eight...seven...six...five...five...five...four...three...two...two...one...stretch." So the eight-second repetition would actually be

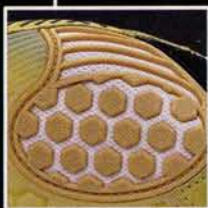


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about 12 seconds long. And the spotter would be grinning as he miscounted.

One time because of an exam, Tom could not make it to the weight room to lift with Joe. I had to pair up Joe with a first-year wrestler. Joe was absolutely livid. He hated to lift with anyone but Tom because Tom always pushed him beyond his limits. Joe went up to the freshman, pointed his finger right between the guy's eyeballs and snapped, "All right but I'm working out first." Well, Joe complained about everything that the poor guy did – he could not do anything to Joe's satisfaction. Joe's last exercise was crunches with manual (partner) resistance. When Joe finished, he stood up, pointed his finger right between the guy's eyeballs again and growled, "Okay, I'm done. Now you're gonna pay for taking it easy on me." The guy's face turned white as new-fallen snow. Joe made him pay real bad. In fact, the guy never came back to the weight room – or the wrestling room.

In October 1985, Rutgers was shut down because of the threat posed by Hurricane Gloria which had New Jersey in its crosshairs. Despite this, I kept the weight room open. I did not think it was an issue since it was an interior room of the gym that was below ground with walls made of cinder blocks. Naturally, two of the athletes who showed up to work out in the hurricane were Joe and Tom. They simply did not miss workouts. At one point, the phone rang. I answered the phone and Mike McHugh – a freshman 118-pounder – was on the other end. It had been a scheduled lifting day and he asked me if the weight room was open. I said, "Sure, Mike. It's only a hurricane!" Mike said that he was having a problem getting to the weight room. (Rutgers is made up of five campuses that are spread out over two towns and separated by a river.) I do not remember why transportation was an issue but it might have been because the bus system was affected by the closing of the school. Anyway, Joe overheard me talking and asked me who was on the phone. I told him that it was Mike McHugh and he did not know if he could get to the weight room in order to lift. Joe said, "Lemme see the phone." I handed it over and Joe asked Mike, "Where are you?" Then he said, "We'll be right there." Now, here is where the story sounds like something right out of a movie about Irish gangsters: Shannon and O'Rourke went to get McHugh. O'Rourke stopped his Volkswagen in front of McHugh and Shannon jumped out. He grabbed McHugh and threw him in the back seat. They drove him to the weight room and took him through a workout showing him no mercy whatsoever. After the savage beating, they dragged him back to the car, threw him in the back seat and took him back to the spot where they had picked him up. There, they dumped him on the pavement and came back to the weight room. (Mike wound up being a

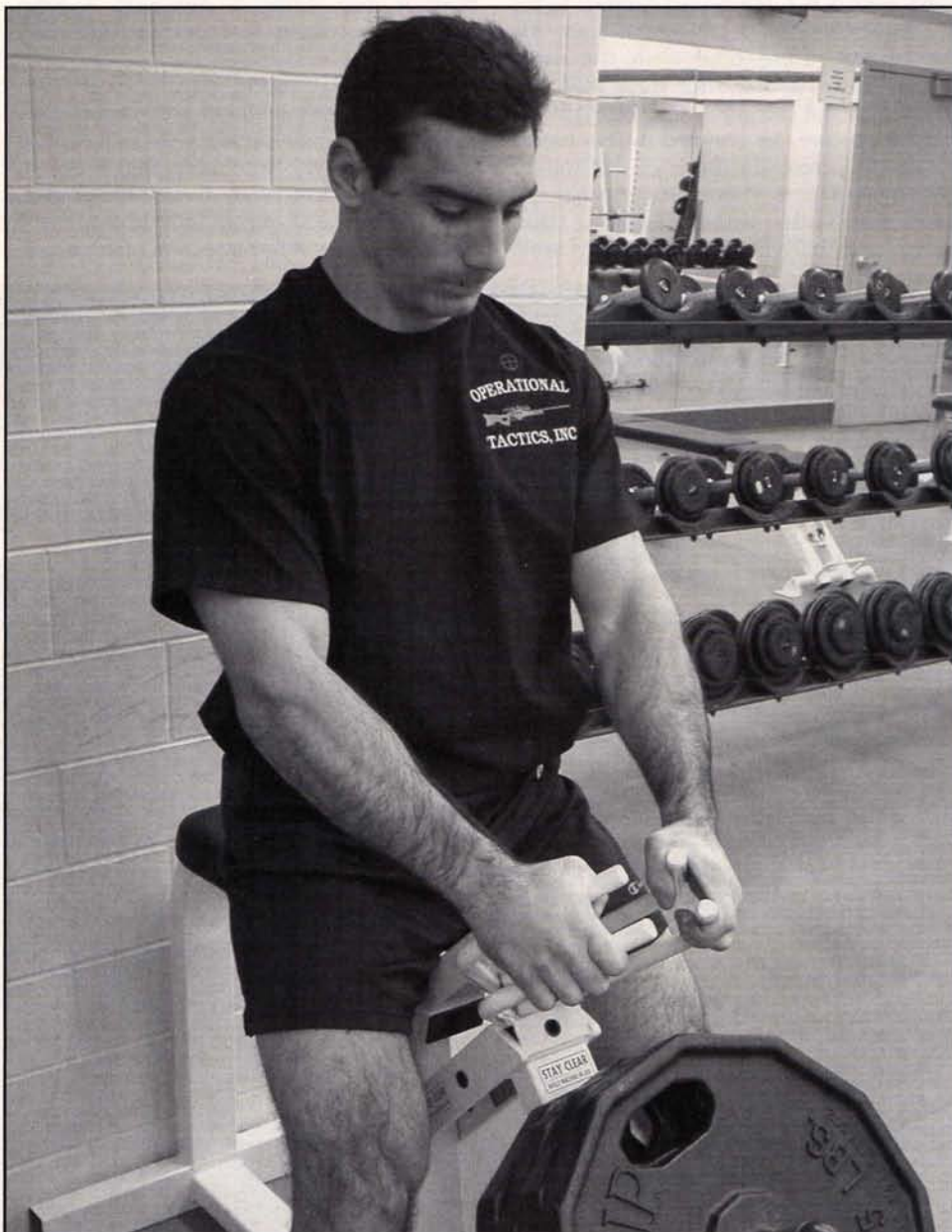
three-time place-winner at the EIWA Championships and with 117 victories, still holds the Rutgers record for most wins in a career).

In the spring of 1985, Deane Oliver – who was the Head Wrestling Coach at Rutgers from 1969-1990 – realized that he would need someone to wrestle at 190 pounds for the upcoming season. He finally found a student who was finishing his junior year. The student was a pretty decent wrestler in high school but had not competed since. I was asked to train him during the summer months to get him in shape for the upcoming season. The first time that he worked out with us, he vomited after his very first set (on a Safe Squat machine). Real bad, too. It took the whole summer before he could get through an entire workout without vomiting but he stuck with the training and was more prepared for the season.

There was a lot of peer pressure in the weight room. Here is a perfect example: The heavyweight had recently joined the team after the end of football season (in

which he played as an offensive lineman). Part of the workout included chins and the rule was that you had to do "12 repetitions any way that you can" (with good technique, of course). This meant that if you did nine repetitions in the regular manner, then you owed three negative-only repetitions; if you did four repetitions in the regular manner, then you owed eight negative-only repetitions. Well, the heavyweight – who was at least 260 pounds – managed a few repetitions in the regular manner, let go of the chin bar and started to walk away. His training partner yelled, "Hey, where ya goin'?" Other guys on the team saw what was happening and ordered the heavyweight to go back to the chin bar. He was slow to return so several of his teammates ran over to him and literally pushed him back to the chin bar where

Princeton wrestler Ryan Bonfiglio doing grip work on a machine. (2003; photo by Pete Silletti)



they surrounded him until he finished the remainder of his 12 repetitions.

Some stories are memorable for other reasons. In the College Avenue Gym, the weight room was spitting distance down the hallway from the wrestling room. After one practice, we herded the team into the weight room for a brief workout. It was a small weight room – only about 1,000 square feet – so I could take a position near the door and see what everyone was doing at once. At the other end of the weight room – maybe 35 feet away – one of the wrestlers was just slopping through a set on the neck machine. I could see that he was using a weight that was ridiculously light and his technique was simply horrible. I yelled across the room, "If that's the way you're gonna train, you might as well not even be in here!" He stopped instantly, stood up and said, "Okay." Then he walked past me and out of the weight room. I was stunned. But that was nothing. A few minutes later, Coach Oliver walked into the weight room with the guy's wrestling gear. He said, "Bruce just said he quit and handed me his gear. What did you say to him?" I told him what happened but he was still upset that the guy quit the team. The wrestler returned to the team about two weeks later but never competed enough to earn a varsity letter. (This athlete was clearly "the most talented guy in the wrestling room" but a classic underachiever).

Most of the stories and memories are

good, though. Space does not permit many more stories but I would be remiss if I did not mention the intense efforts of Scott Becker, Tim Hennessey, Chris Hiro, John Kurelja, Mike Policastro, Mike Semar, Ed Spatola and Tim Woods.

In 1990, I returned to Princeton University as the Strength and Conditioning Coach and Health Fitness Coordinator. Since then, I have witnessed many Princeton wrestlers exhibit intense efforts and purposeful training. Ryan Bonfiglio built himself from a small 142-pounder into a strapping 165-pounder in one summer through dedicated effort and hard work. (As a 142-pounder, Ryan's record was 13-14; in his first season as a 165-pounder, he recorded more than 30 wins). And there was Greg Parker who never lifted weights in high school but almost never missed a workout in college. He built himself up from someone who did not even look like an athlete into someone who was all man. (Greg was a two-time NCAA All-American, finishing second at 174 in 2002 and eighth at 190 in 2003. In the 2001-02 season, he lost only two matches all year – both to Greg Jones of West Virginia who would win three NCAA Championships.) Other Princeton wrestlers who quickly come to mind for their efforts in the weight room are Chris Ackerman, Milo Adams, Scott Bowers, Jon Bunt, John Gluckow, Scott Pasquini, Scott Weir and Shane Woolf. Every now and then I run into former wrestlers and a number of them tell

me that they still use "the program." Current Head Coach Mike New is no stranger to hard work. He can often be seen in the weight room going through workouts with his wrestlers.

Because my position now has numerous administrative responsibilities, I rarely get in the trenches anymore to take wrestlers or other athletes through workouts. I do recall training a freshman named Tim Ferriss who had wrestled in high school (though not at Princeton). Tim was also an accomplished judo athlete and martial artist. Needless to say, he was a pretty tough customer who pushed himself very hard. At one point in the workout, Tim was doing a pullover on a machine and I thought he had just about reached muscular fatigue so I yelled, "You got two more reps!" to which he immediately yelled back, "I got five more!" Man, I love attitudes like that, so should you.

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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