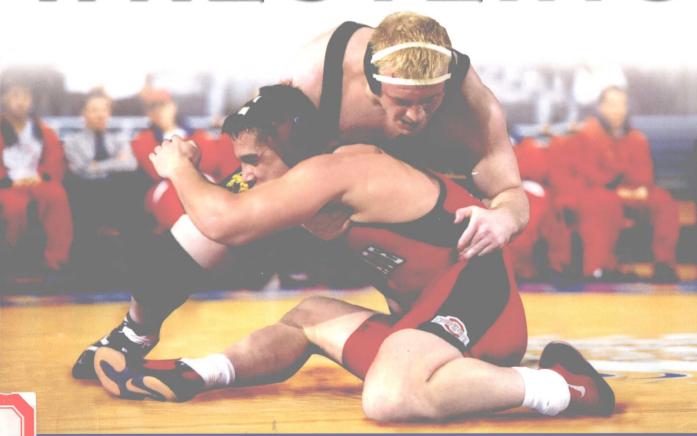
MOVES FOR SUCCESS ON AND BEYOND THE MAT

WAELITE WAS WRESTLING



TOM RYAN

HEAD COACH, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

VITH JULIE SAMPSON

PHOTOGRAPHY

BRUCE CURTIS

ELITE WRESTLING



MOVES FOR SUCCESS ON AND BEYOND THE MAT

TOM RYAN

WITH JULIE SAMPSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE CURTIS



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This book is dedicated in loving memory of Teague William Ryan. The inspiration for this book, Teague was the mascot for the Hofstra University wrestling team during the 2003–2004 season. He died tragically on February 16, 2004.



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Introduction: The Will to Wrestle

So, what is it about wrestlers?

Some people are born competitors. There is nothing that can stop them. They move through life actually generating more energy and drive to overcome the same boundaries that stop virtually everybody else. The sport of wrestling was custom designed for this breed of person.

The life lessons that are learned on the wrestling mat never diminish; in fact, most wrestlers carry that same focus, discipline, and drive into their professional lives. When the life skills that are learned in wrestling translate into the real world, here's what happens:

- You can be like Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. secretary of defense.
- You can be like Dennis Hastert, the U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives.
- You can be like Dr. Norman Bourlag, the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize recipient.
- You can be like Kyle Maynard, a wrestler born with congenital amputation who learned to wrestle and be a winner in the game of life.
- You can be like John Irving, a famous American writer.
- You can be like Stephen Neal, an offensive guard for the threetime Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots.
- You can be like Dan Gable, the legendary wrestler and coach.
- You can be like Tricia Saunders, a pioneer in women's wrestling.

You can be anything you set your mind to because wrestling prepares you for life.

It is a gift to train and compete in wrestling. For those fortunate people who realize that their gifts can help shape future generations of wrestlers, they are proud to be coaching wrestling.

Today's wrestling coach is a multifaceted creature: one of great leadership, patience, discipline, compassion, knowledge, and focus.



Think of the hours of instruction in physical conditioning, technique training, and drilling. A wrestling coach has to have a high level of patience in offering guidance with technique and nutritional advice to determined athletes. He has to know what to say to help celebrate the thrill of a victory or to help understand the pain of a loss. There is no easy road to coaching a wrestling team and no known secret success formula, but there are some top coaches in the country willing to share their perspectives on how they try to shape what is the oldest sport known to mankind.

The pages that follow are a showcase of heartfelt experiences in competition, coaching, and life from amazing people who are who they are because of their association with wrestling.

So, what is it about wrestlers? Read on.

About the Authors

Tom Ryan became the head coach at Ohio State University in 2006. Ryan coached the Hofstra University wrestling team for 11 seasons and is a two-time New York State Coach of the Year. As a college wrestler, Ryan was a two-time NCAA Division I All-American and a member of the University of Iowa's national championship teams under Coach Dan Gable in 1991 and 1992. A two-time Big 10 Conference champion at Iowa, Ryan wrestled for two years at Iowa after transfer-



ring from Syracuse University, where he captured an Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association (EIWA) championship in 1989.

Ryan is married to Lynette, and they live in Ohio with their children, Jordan, Jake, and Mackenzie.

Julie Sampson published *Beginning Wrestling*, her first book about wrestling, in 2000. She teamed up with Tom Ryan and photographer Bruce Curtis to produce the fundamental

guide to the sport.

Sampson has had many articles published in *Newsday*, *New York Times*, and *American Cheerleader* magazine. She was the sports editor for Imprint Newspapers in West Hartford, Connecticut. Over the years, she has acquired a deep appreciation for wrestling.

Sampson is married to John, and they live on Long Island with their two children, Troy and Sheila.



Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
	Introduction: The Will to Wrestle	xi
1	Wrestling Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint Coach Tom Ryan, Ohio State University	1
2	In Defense of Wrestling Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense	9
3	Whatever, Whoever, Whenever Wrestling Dan Gable, Legendary Coach and Wrestler	15
4	No Elbows, No Knees, No Excuses Kyle Maynard, Author and Motivational Speaker	23
5	The Code of Coaching Ethics Coach Terry Brands, U.S. Olympic Freestyle Wrestling	31
6	Making the Grade Coach Jay Weiss, Harvard University; Coach Brendan Buckley, Columbia University	37
7	As Good as It Gets Stephen Neal, New England Patriots	43
8	Promoting Your Program Coach J Robinson, University of Minnesota	49
9	Speaking of Wrestling Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives	55



10	Pioneer in Women's Wrestling Tricia Saunders, World Champion Wrestler	61
11	Role of the Assistant Coach Assistant Coach Jim Heffernan, University of Illinois; Assistant Coaches Donny Pritzlaff and Rob Anspach, Hofstra University	67
12	Surrounding Yourself with Good People Ben Peterson, Olympic Gold Medalist	75
13	Peaking Throughout the Season and the Essence of Speed Coach Carl Adams, Boston University	81
14	Wrestling Leads to Nobel Peace Prize Dr. Norman Borlaug, 1970 Nobel Peace Prize Winner	89
15	Learning from Losing Coach Tom Brands, University of Iowa	95
16	Running a Tournament Ken Kraft, Father of the Midlands Tournament	99
17	A Call to Serve Others Father John McLaughlin	105
18	The Will to Overcome Tragedy Timothy Donovan	111
19	The Year-Round Wrestler Jim Zalesky, Former University of Iowa Coach and Wrestler	117
20	Building Team Unity Coach Greg Strobel, Lehigh University; Coach T. J. Kerr, California State University, Bakersfield; and Coach Tom Borrelli, Central Michigan University	121
21	Making the Right Call Dr. Vincent Zuaro, Referee	131



22	The Edge of Mental Toughness Coach Steve Fraser, U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling	135
23	Seize the Moment Sam Kline, All-American at West Virginia University	141
24	The Role of Supportive Parents Advice from Fathers in the Coaching Corner	147
25	My Two Champions John Irving, Writer and Former Prep School Coach	159
26	Wrestling with Politics James Jordan, Ohio Senator	165
27	He Stands Alone Coach Jack Spates, University of Oklahoma	169
28	Drills Knock-Out Drill 172 Down Block Drill 174 High Crotch Head Block Spin Drill 176 Squaring Hips Drill 178 Single Leg Head Block Spin Drill 180 Monkey Grip Go Behind Drill 182 Snap a Wrist to an Underhook Throw-By Drill 186 Post Triceps Drill 190 Knee Slide Drill 193 Bull Fight Drill 195 Hip Heist Drill 199 Stand-Up Mat Return Drill 201 Spiral Ride Claw Drill 203	171
	Index	205

Wrestling Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint

Coach Tom Ryan, Ohio State University

have learned a lot about life through my experiences with wrestling, both as a wrestler and as a coach. The testimonies from other wrestlers about what the sport has meant in their lives always fascinates me. Everyone seems to have a story.

If you think for a moment about the circle in the center of a wrestling mat, it seems to represent life; there is no clear beginning and there is no clear ending. In the middle of that circle is one human working his strategy, strength, and technique against another. On many days, the battle



in the circle reflects the wrestler who has outworked the other. Sometimes the gift of athleticism prevails over hard work. Other times, it comes down to a judgment call or the clock running out of time. Occasionally, luck becomes a factor, good luck for one, and bad luck for another.

Inside that circle lessons are learned that do not end with wins and losses. Many wrestlers who reflect on their time spent in wrestling find that the things that took place on the mat are what have driven them through life.

In this chapter, I share my insights on coaching and what I am trying to pass on to the next generation of wrestlers who are learning to face the challenges inside the circle of life. I don't claim to have all the answers, which is why this book features interviews with a wide variety of wrestlers who are all intriguing in their own way.

For Tom Ryan, head wrestling coach at Ohio State University, winning certainly is a sweet reward from lots of year-round hard work, but it is not even close to being the main focus of his program. In Ryan's eyes, the key to his success as a coach is when he inspires his athletes to reach a personal epiphany—when they discover their higher purpose in life.

"My job as a coach is to motivate my wrestlers. The last thing I want to do is judge them. All I can ask of them is to give some thought to why they are here on Earth. We are not put here by accident, so why are we here?" Ryan has asked.

That question alone is more challenging than any practice session or collegiate wrestling match. Why are we here?

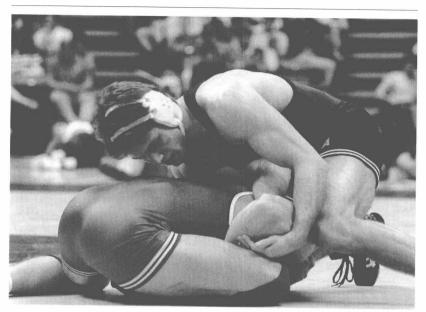
It wasn't always this way with Ryan. After 14 years of coaching and a lifetime of competing in wrestling, there was a time when training, making weight, and, of course, the competition itself was his prime directive in life. Eventually, Ryan's focus shifted to finding a deeper understanding of what wrestling is all about.

"That is the way it is for many people involved in wrestling, which is good to a point, but there is so much more to it than that. There is something far greater than winning championships. My goal is to help my wrestlers figure out what that is," he said.

It took something far beyond the depths of wrestling to open Ryan's eyes to the meaning of life, leading to his personal epiphany.

Ryan was in the midst of a successful wrestling season in February 2004. He was at his Long Island home in Hauppauge, New York,





Tom Ryan works his opponent from the top as a wrestler for Coach Dan Gable's Iowa Hawkeyes. Ryan took second place in the NCAA finals at 158 pounds in 1991 and finished third in 1992.

(Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa Sports Information Department.)

with his wife, Lynette, and four children, Jordan, Jake, Teague, and Mackenzie. The Ryan family had just finished dinner when Teague, the Ryan's five-year-old son, suddenly stopped breathing. Ryan tried to revive his son with CPR, but Teague died tragically in his father's arms. As it was later determined, a rare disorder of the heart's electrical rhythm claimed Teague's life.

"I think about Teague all the time. Where is he? What was the purpose of his death? Where will I find the strength to carry on for the rest of our family? I have to believe that Teague's death will make me a better person. I have to believe there is a higher calling and a plan," Ryan shared.

Ryan had a tight bond with Teague as he had spent an enormous amount of time with him every day of his life. Teague was the mascot of the Hofstra wrestling team. Loved by the whole team, he spent a large part of his life in the Hofstra wrestling room.

"I always told my wrestlers that once you've wrestled, everything else in life is easy. I can't even come close to saying that anymore," Ryan said.





Teague Ryan, 5, sits next to his father, Coach Tom Ryan, on the Hofstra University bench. The team mascot in the 2004 season, Teague died tragically in February of that season. (Photo courtesy of Bruce Curtis.)

So what is it that helped Ryan carry on after suffering such an enormous loss? Perhaps he has figured out that the purpose in life is to get to heaven and that when he gets there, Teague will be waiting for him with open arms. Ryan moves carefully through each day, with some days being more difficult than other days, striving to be the best husband, the best father, the best coach, and the best person that he knows how to be.

In the days of coaching before the loss of his son, Ryan believes that he often put the individual wrestler first. Now, he realizes, the focus must be on the team as a whole and not on the individual. Wrestling is a team sport, and it should be coached that way.

Ryan establishes clear boundaries with solid team rules. The rules are reviewed at the start of each season, and each wrestler has to sign a contract showing that he agrees to them. Members of the coaching staff make sure that all of the rules are understood and adhered to with no exceptions. The team meets as a group regularly, coaches meet individually with the athletes, and through good communication everyone stays on track. A wrestler getting into trouble is not acceptable for any program. A coach must hold his wrestlers account-



able for every little thing. Coaching is not a popularity contest. All problems must be addressed immediately and professionally, before the situation escalates.

"As a coach you cannot let one individual pollute the team. You have to set clear ultimatums. Unfortunately, sometimes things don't work out and you have to have an athlete say good-bye to wrestling. Basically, that individual has chosen not to do it. We all make our own choices and have to live with the outcome," he said.

Ryan believes that wrestling is just as much an internal battle as it is an external battle. Success needs to be measured not by winning percentages and records, but by simply asking yourself if you achieved what you were capable of achieving. If you can answer yes to that, then you had success. Each wrestler has to live up to his own potential. Sometimes you can win and not be satisfied with your performance, and sometimes you can lose, but feel pleased with your effort.

"It's a tough philosophy to follow, but it's not healthy to measure yourself with wins and losses. Society sets us up so that we think we have to achieve the highest and have the best of everything or else we're not satisfied. We have to get out of the habit of thinking that way. Your conscience will ultimately get to you. If you do everything that you are supposed to do, then you will have the success that you are capable of achieving. I really believe that. I think that the harder you work, the more confidence you build up, and those things really go hand in hand," he said.

When Ryan was a rookie coach out of college, he thought if you wrestled, then you naturally could coach the sport. But he learned soon that coaching and wrestling are completely different. As a coach you have to deal with people from all walks of life. As a wrestler, your main focus is yourself. A coach has to worry about so many details while keeping in mind all of the different personalities involved with the program. It takes time to mold a program using what you have available. It is crucial for a coach to know the level of his athletes, concentrate on the lesser strengths, and work on making improvements. And, Ryan believes that the coaching staff must take very seriously the fact that parents are entrusting you with their children.

"It is important to know your wrestlers as individuals. It is pretty easy to assess a person's athletic abilities, but it is a far greater chal-