

## The Melbourne Olympics

The 1956 Olympics were held in Melbourne, Australia, in November and December, impinging on the 1956–1957 collegiate season. The United States entered both freestyle and Greco-Roman teams for the first time since 1920, and the lineups were loaded with current and former collegians. Dan Hodge of Oklahoma, two-time defending NCAA champ at 177 pounds, captured the silver medal in freestyle at 79 kg. Peter Blair of Navy, NCAA champ at 191 pounds in 1954 and 1955, was the other U.S. medalist, winning a bronze at 87 kg. Myron Roderick, recently graduated three-time NCAA champion from Oklahoma State, finished fourth at 61 kg. Roderick dropped a close decision to gold medalist Shozo Sasahara of Japan, considered the best wrestler in the tournament, and failed to reach the medal round.

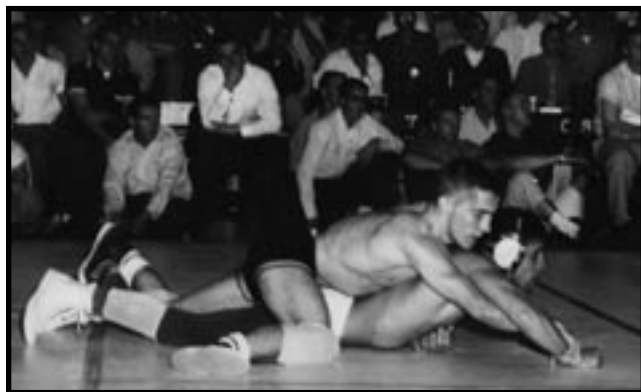
## Preseason Outlook

A preseason poll of wrestling coaches conducted by *Amateur Wrestling News* had the Sooners of Oklahoma at the top, followed by Oklahoma State and Pittsburgh. The Cowboys had edged Oklahoma by three points at the 1956 NCAA tournament but would have to cope with the coaching transition and just two returning All-Americans. The Oklahoma lineup included two returning champs, Dan Hodge and Gordon Roesler, along with two-time runner-up Bobby Lyons and Olympian Dick Delgado.

Pittsburgh, the host for the 1957 NCAA tournament, boasted a lineup with two-time champ Ed Peery and All-Americans Bill Hulings, Vic DeFelice, and Ron Schirf. The Panthers, coached by Rex Peery, had three straight top-three team finishes and were looking to capture the title in front of their fans in late March. In the Big Ten, Iowa and Michigan were expected to field strong teams, although the Hawkeyes would have two-time champ Terry McCann for just the first semester.

## Regular Season

There was little dual meet action prior to the first of the year. Cornell scored a mild upset when it knocked off Lehigh 17-9. Oklahoma opened its dual meet season on January 4 by hosting Iowa. The Sooners won 14-12, with a fall by Dan Hodge providing the winning margin. In the marquee match, Terry McCann defeated Dick Delgado 4-1 at 123 pounds. One week later at Norman, Oklahoma handed new Cowboy coach Myron Roderick a loss in his inaugural dual meet 17-9. Harmon Leslie got the Pokes off to a good start by handing Delgado his second straight loss, but the Sooners' strength in the upper weights prevailed. Pittsburgh, which began the season with a 17-meet winning streak, scored impressive wins over visiting Michigan 25-3 and Iowa State 17-8. Lehigh scored an upset over Penn State 16-13 at University Park.



Terry McCann of Iowa controls Dick Delgado of Oklahoma in their 123-pound bout. McCann won the bout 4-1, but the Sooners triumphed in the dual 14-12.

In early February, Iowa State visited the state of Oklahoma for a pair of challenging duals. The Cyclones managed a draw in Stillwater 13-13 but lost to the Sooners 17-9. One week later Oklahoma visited Stillwater and trounced the hosts 23-3. It was the worst beating the Cowboys had suffered in their 45 years of collegiate wrestling. Doug Blubaugh was the only winner for OSU. In the East, Pittsburgh extended its winning streak to 26 by defeating Lehigh 15-9 at Bethlehem, but two weeks later Penn State ended Pitt's streak with a 14-11 upset.

## Conference Tournaments

Minnesota won its first Big Ten title since 1941 by a single point over Michigan, 55-54. Iowa finished a distant third in the team race with 39 points. The team championship was not settled until the 167-pound class, when Ken Kraft of Northwestern triumphed 6-4 over Jack Marchello, Michigan's last finalist and 1956 champion at 177 pounds. Mike Rodriquez of Michigan defended his title at 157 pounds by pinning Ron Baker of Minnesota in 2:37 and was named Outstanding Wrestler of the tournament. Max Pearson of the Wolverines reclaimed the 130-pound title he had won in 1955.

Tournament host Oklahoma won its eighth straight Big Seven title by edging Iowa State 71-64. It was the last Big Seven meeting because Oklahoma State was joining the conference to make it the Big Eight in 1958. Iowa State had six finalists to Oklahoma's five and a 61-55 lead going into the finals. However, the Sooners won all five of their finals matches, while Ron Gray was the lone winner for the Cyclones. Dick Delgado, Bobby Lyons, Rex Edgar, Dan Hodge, and Gordon Roesler achieved the finals sweep for the Sooners.

Penn State unseated three-time defending team champion Pittsburgh in the EIWA tournament held at Penn State. The Nittany Lions won by a comfortable margin, 74-61. Lehigh finished third for the fifth straight year with 48 points. John Johnston, John Pepe, and Dave Adams won titles for Penn State at 130, 137, and 147 pounds. Pepe upset defending champion Joe Gratto of Lehigh 4-2, reversing the result of the 1956 final. Ed Peery, Dave Johnson, and Ron Schirf captured individual crowns for the Panthers. It was the second title for Johnson and Peery, who dropped to 123 pounds this season after being upset in the 1956 semifinals at 130 pounds.



Doug Blubaugh of Oklahoma State, 1957 NCAA and 1960 Olympic champion, attempts to break down Dale Ketelsen of Iowa State in a dual meet between Oklahoma State and Iowa State. Blubaugh won 4-1, while the teams drew 13-13.

## NCAA Tournament

The 1957 NCAA tournament in Pittsburgh set a record for the number of participants at 213 although the 63 participating schools amounted to three fewer than the record of 66 established at Cornell in 1955. Oklahoma had four wrestlers seeded first, along with a third seed. This concentration of strength made the Sooners the favorite for their first team crown since 1952. However, Pitt and Penn State with six and five seeded wrestlers were considered a threat to capture the East's second team championship.

A strong first day by Oklahoma put it in charge of the tournament with 24 points and four wrestlers in the semifinals. Pitt had one more wrestler alive but was six points back in the team race. Oklahoma State and Penn State were tied for third with 13 points and three semifinalists each. There were very few upsets in the first day.

### The Second Day

By mid-Saturday afternoon, the team race had shifted in favor of Pittsburgh. The Panthers won four of five semifinals and jumped into the lead with 50 points. Oklahoma had just two finalists (Dick Delgado and Dan Hodge) and trailed the Panthers by nine points. Oklahoma State and Penn State had 29 points and two finalists but were not a factor in the team race.

The 123-pound final would be a repeat of the 1956 finals between Ed Peery of Pitt and Harmon Leslie of Oklahoma State. Leslie, who beat 1953 champ Dick Mueller of Minnesota to make the finals, had led Peery until the third period in the previous meeting. Thus, the Pitt senior would face a major challenge in his attempt to equal the three titles won by his father and coach, Rex, and older brother Hugh. Oklahoma suffered a major setback at 130 pounds when top-seeded Bobby Lyons injured his knee when winning in the quarterfinals and forfeited his next match to Max Pearson of Michigan.

The final at 137 pounds would be the fourth tournament meeting between John Pepe of Penn State and Joe Gratto of Lehigh. The two had split the EIWA finals in 1956 and 1957, and Pepe won the third-place match at the 1956 NCAA meeting. Ron Flemming of Franklin & Marshall, the number two seed, gained the dubious honor of meeting Dan Hodge in the finals by beating Jesse Stokes of Wyoming. Defending heavyweight champion Gordon Roesler of Oklahoma was upset 5-4 by Henry Jordan of Virginia, a future All-Pro tackle for the Green Bay Packers.

In the wrestle-backs, five Oklahoma wrestlers reached the consolation finals and virtually clinched the team title for the Sooners. Pitt suffered a major setback when Dave Johnson was upset by unheralded Bob Koster of tiny Williams College in the consolation semifinals and lost a referees' decision. Koster had paid his own way to the tournament and was the only All-American ever for his school.

## The Finals

Pittsburgh trailed Oklahoma by eight points upon entering the finals and had to win all four of its matches to capture the team title. The Panthers' hopes were immediately dashed when Sooner Dick Delgado built up an 8-0 lead before pinning Panther Bill Hulings in 8:11 at 115 pounds. Thus, the interest shifted from the team race to Ed Peery's final at 123 pounds. It is difficult to imagine how much pressure was on Peery to complete the unique three-by-three set of titles before the home fans, with his father in his corner and his brother in the stands. Harmon Leslie of Oklahoma State was his opponent, and the Cowboy used his height advantage to move to a 7-4 lead in the third period. Peery proved he had the heart of a champion by scoring a late takedown and time advantage to put the match into overtime. The wrestlers were deadlocked 2-2 after overtime, and memories flashed back to Peery's senior year in high school, when he lost a referee's decision in the state finals. This time the result was a unanimous decision in his favor and a third NCAA title.

John Johnston of Penn State, who had been defeated by Peery in a dual meet, captured the title at 130 pounds by downing Max Pearson of Michigan 7-5. Joe Gratto of Lehigh evened his career record at 2-2 versus Johnston's teammate John Pepe by capturing the 137-pound title 9-8 on riding time. At 147 pounds, cross-state rivals Simon Roberts of Iowa and Ron Gray of Iowa State were even at 2-2 after regulation. Roberts rode out Gray in one overtime period and escaped in the other for a 2-0 margin and the title and became the first African American to win an NCAA wrestling championship. The pair had met in the 1954 Iowa high school finals, with Roberts winning that match as well.

Doug Blubaugh of Oklahoma State captured the first individual title for rookie coach Myron Roderick by defeating Mike Rodriguez of Michigan, who had pinned his way to the finals, 9-3. Tom Alberts, who was ineligible for the EIWA tournament, won Pitt's second title by defeating another local wrestler, Ralph Schneider of Waynesburg, 8-5 at 167 pounds with a late near fall.

Dan Hodge locked up his second Outstanding Wrestler Award by flattening Ron Flemming of Franklin & Marshall midway through the final period of the 177-pound bout. The 191-pound final, like the one at 137 pounds, was another repeat of an EIWA final. Unlike the earlier bout, the contestants wrestled very cautiously. Ron Schirf won a split referees' decision over Tony Stremic of Navy to give Pitt three individual champs. In the last final of the evening, Bob Norman of Illinois scored a convincing 6-1 win over Henry Jordan of Virginia.

Oklahoma finished seven points ahead of Pittsburgh, 73-66. Iowa State edged defending champ Oklahoma State for third 38-37. Oklahoma won the title in enemy territory despite losing Bob Lyons, the top seed at 130 pounds, to a knee injury. The Sooners were able to more than offset this setback by having backups Bernard Sullivan and Leonard Shelton place third at 191 pounds and fourth at 123 pounds. For Pittsburgh, the 1957 season would be its high watermark. The school would never again challenge for the team title, and its 66 team points remain a school record. The tournament was also the best ever for the EIWA. The conference had nine finalists and five champs.

Hodge and Peery completed their careers as three-time NCAA champs. Hodge matched the accomplishments of Bill Koll of Northern Iowa in 1948 by finishing with a perfect record and winning two Outstanding Wrestler Awards. Hodge was blessed with preternatural strength that helped him pin 36 of his 46 collegiate opponents. Peery finished his career with a 51-1-0 record; the sole loss occurred against Joe Alissi of Springfield in the 1956 EIWA semifinals at 130 pounds.

## Peery Family

It is a story virtually unmatched in any other sport. Rex Peery (1910–1999) was a three-time NCAA wrestling champion at 118 pounds for Oklahoma State from 1933–1935. After becoming head coach at Pittsburgh in 1949, he coached his elder son, Hugh, to NCAA titles in 1952–1954. The next three years he coached his younger son, Ed, to the identical honors—a family feat virtually everyone in wrestling believes will never happen again.

If that sounds easy, it was anything but, as movingly shared in an *Amateur Wrestling News* story written in 1964 by a knowledgeable source: the wrestlers' mother, Clara. She and Rex were married at age 19, within a month after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. He was employed by his father in outdoor advertising before the Crash eliminated everything. That the young couple already owned a small home with rentable apartments helped out, as did Oklahoma State coach Edward Gallagher, who recruited Rex with an offer of painting work with the school's maintenance department.

The Peerys became parents during his first year in college. Their second son, Ed, was named for Gallagher and was born a few hours before Rex won his third NCAA title as a senior. A telegram informing Rex of his newest son was delivered on the mat just before his final bout! In addition to three NCAA titles, Peery was an alternate on the 1936 Olympic team, won two National AAU titles, and lettered twice in baseball. He never lost a dual meet in high school or college and won his first title by beating the defending NCAA champion, Joe Puerta of Illinois.

Following graduation, Rex Peery enjoyed an outstanding coaching career lasting 29 years, the first 13 of them at Oklahoma high schools. The death of Gallagher brought Rex to wrestling powerhouse Tulsa Central High School in 1940, after Art Griffith left his position there to take over the Cowboys. In a moving tribute to the pressure of fathers coaching sons, Mrs. Peery wrote: "Only sons of coaches can know what a disadvantage this is. They must exemplify everything idealistic the coach tries to impart to all the boys in the room. Yet once it is hurdled, it provides a sense of pride and satisfaction unequalled by any other." She added: "It was always a family affair, Rex's job. Though I must admit we had many Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners wrecked during those years."

At Tulsa, Hugh won two state titles—the last one living with friends of the family, while the rest of the clan headed east where their father would coach at Pittsburgh. A year later, Hugh enrolled there to rejoin the family.

Rex coached 16 years at Pitt (1950–1965) and coached its first-ever All-American (Hugh's title in 1952), nine individual champions to 13 titles, and 11 men who reached the finals 19 times. He had 12 straight top-10 teams (1952–1963) with four straight in the top three. His college dual meet record was 116–43–3 (233–58–6 lifetime), and his wrestlers won 23 EIWA titles during the most competitive time in its history. Rex then served in Pitt's athletic department as an assistant professor until his retirement.

Peery was also coach of the U.S. freestyle team in the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo and was a member of the Olympic Wrestling Committee for 12 years. He was one of the founders of USA Wrestling programs in Pennsylvania and served on its national governing council as well as the board of governors of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

After a 0–10 season debut in 1949–1950, Rex's coaching prowess soared. Hugh finished 56–1 at Pittsburgh from 1952–1954 and matched Dad's three titles (all at 115 pounds) by winning his last 48 bouts. As a freshman he won a gold medal at the 1951 Pan American Games in Argentina. He then earned a sixth in the 1952 Olympic Games at Helsinki and won two of three bouts. He was a versatile takedown artist who liked to jump out to early leads and maintain pressure on rivals. At three NCAA tournaments, his only close bout was a 6–5 semifinal win in 1954 over sophomore Terry McCann of Iowa, who won the next two years and was an Olympic champion in 1960. Peery won it on the basis of 1:15 time advantage. "This was a good thing," says Hugh today, "since they didn't have overtime that year." Hugh's lifetime record included more than 100 victories against only half a dozen defeats.

Taking family ties to extreme, second son Ed also started wrestling as a sophomore and earned an eerily similar 48–1 mark with two state championships at Shaler High School in Glenshaw, Pennsylvania. The only loss was a referee's decision to Dean Seese of Clearfield High School in the finals as a senior. Wrestling in the Wilkes Open that year, Ed defeated a Temple wrestler who became the EIWA runner-up the next year (ironically, losing in the finals to Hugh). Including open tournaments, Ed's overall career wins also numbered more than 100.



The Peery family celebrates their ninth NCAA title in as many tries. Ed in the center is flanked by brother Hugh on the left and father and coach Rex.

## Peery Family (continued)

The younger son was 51-1 at Pittsburgh, with the only loss 4-3 in the semifinals of the EIWA tournament his junior year to Springfield's Joe Alissi, while competing up a weight at 130 pounds. Alissi lost 3-2 in the finals to 1956 national champ, Johnny Johnston of Penn State. Only a mother could know the pressure of sitting in the stands: "We truly knew the meaning of the word 'pathos.' I hope we bore the gibes with grace and dignity. Where else but in sports can the great American fan taunt full blast to their heart's desire? While they love a champion, it is great to see one go down to defeat."

But when it mattered most, like his father and brother, Ed simply refused to accept defeat. In a style apart from brother Hugh, he came from behind to win two of his three NCAA finals. In 1955, he broke open a close match with Lewis Guidi of West Virginia by reversing and pinning the Mountaineer with 30 seconds left in the match. As a junior he was taken down twice by Harmon Leslie of Oklahoma State but rallied to win 7-5.

His last college bout was one of the most dramatic in tournament history—and it occurred at home in Pittsburgh. Ed trailed Leslie again, by a 7-3 score in the third period, but rallied with an escape, takedown, and riding time to force overtime. After the extra periods ended 2-2, he received a unanimous referees' decision. In hindsight, Ed has often wondered how he could be taken down by Leslie five times in two finals with the same move—a snap and spin. "I felt pretty stupid since I knew it was coming—but I just couldn't stop it!"

Reflecting back half a century later, Ed pondered how it all happened under their father's tutelage. "Hugh and I started wrestling through natural progression. We both began wrestling competitively as sophomores in high school, Hugh in Oklahoma and me in Pennsylvania. Dad taught and coached for a living, so we wanted to learn more, and he started teaching us wrestling skills on the living room rug. Lessons eventually became a regular pre-dinner event, and the family rug eventually had to be replaced. Hugh and I were eager participants. He was older and learned quicker and was tolerant of my slowness to learn. As a wrestler, Hugh was the technician. He was slick and exacting with outstanding skills. Seemingly every move was planned and executed perfectly. I was a competitive gifted athlete determined to win. We were alike in that no one worked harder than we did.

"In the summer of 1950 Dad revised a wrestling text written by Edward Gallagher. Hugh and I were demonstrators for the text pictures, at 15 and 18 years, so we understood moves and technique. Although Dad never said much before meets, I remember this advice: 'You'll be seeing this guy again; make sure he doesn't want to see you again. Whip him good!' He also told us often, 'If you like to work, you'll love to wrestle.'"

The opposite may be true. Still practicing dentistry today in his office home after 40 years, Hugh Peery was overheard repeating his favorite theme at the 2004 EIWA anniversary dinner. Looking fit as a fiddle, anyone who met him heard: "I LOVE my job!" He manages to relax by spending time in Hilton Head, South Carolina, and golfing in Pittsburgh.

Within four years after graduation, Ed Peery would continue his intensity as the popular coach at the U.S. Naval Academy for 27 seasons (1961-1987) and competed against his father's Panther team in his first five years in the EIWA. His Midshipmen earned eight EIWA team championships (Rex won four), 48 individual titles, and 28 All-American medals, and his dual meet mark was 311-89-12. His top star was Lloyd Keaser (1970-1972), who was a 1973 World champion, silver medalist at the 1976 Olympic Games, and two-time medalist at the world-renowned Tbilisi tournament. Peery was National Coach of the Year in 1969 and served as a member of USA Wrestling's national teaching staff.

After retiring as coach, Ed became the Naval Academy's highest ranking civilian employee, in charge of all recreation programs. Today he's "retired, retired," as he says, keeping busy working on his home with wife, Gretchen, plus church-related and other volunteer projects. Coach Peery reports that since 2000, "I've been a volunteer assistant coach at the local high school. It's fun, and I enjoy helping the young athletes."

For a family story coming full circle over 75 years, that sums things up very nicely. *Denny Diehl*