

Before the Finals

By Rulon Gardner



In this excerpt from Rulon Gardner's memoir, *Never Stop Pushing: My Life from a Wyoming Farm to the Olympic Medals Stand*, Gardner recalls "The Miracle on the Mat," his unforgettable upset victory over Russian legend Alexander Karelin to win Greco-Roman gold at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.

Before the final, I had an hour to rest. I went back to a United States Olympic Committee hotel room where we could go relax. I was by myself, because no one really knew who I was – yet.

"What a fun place to be," I thought to myself as I considered where I was, the atmosphere, the surroundings – and what was at stake. Almost everyone else was counting down the time to Karelin's final coronation as the best ever in this sport, arguably the most dominant athlete in Olympic sport history. Not many people even knew it was a Wyoming farm boy who was left in his path.

When I got to the room, the first thing I did was call my friends back home to let them know I was in the final. Everyone already knew, but hopes weren't that high because Karelin still stood in the way.

Just three years my senior, Karelin was a legend, and his reputation was boosted by fans and writers around the globe. Our sport was not often mentioned in the Olympic preview editions of magazines and newspapers, but when it was, Karelin was always the focus of the story. *Time Magazine Europe* thought Karelin was a lock for gold in Sydney, illustrating his mythical status with a story about how he carried a five-hundred-pound refrigerator, alone, up eight flights of stairs and then adding: "Humans have even less of a chance against Karelin, 32, a super-heavyweight Greco-Roman wrestler who has won gold medals in each of the past three Summer Games. In fact, the Siberian native has never lost in international competition. His

streak extends 13 years, an astounding record. No wonder Karelin is a 'bogatyr' - a folk hero-in Russia, where he represents his home town in the Duma (the Russian parliament) and holds the rank of colonel in the customs police."

The wrestling Web site Grapplers-World.com wrote that Karelin was in a class all by himself heading into Sydney: "A horror fiction writer could not conjure up a more imposing human being. With looks any Hollywood director would kill for, Karelin is the real deal. No man in the history of wrestling has owned the sport like he has, and no man has made cowards out of otherwise supreme athletes like he has. There is simply no way to verbally capture what Karelin can physically do to his opponents. From his unbelievable training regimen to his reverse body lift, he has a lock on the Greco-Roman heavy-weight division with no signs of ever relinquishing it."

Trying to nap, I thought about all of this. When a friend called fifteen minutes before I had to return to the wrestling arena, I decided to stay awake and get focused.

I thought about how this was almost too good to be true. I thought about what could be: Rulon, I asked myself, what if. . . .


Yet, I had to wrestle Alexander Karelin. I should have been overwhelmed, but I wasn't at all.

I walked back for my match. The roads were crowded, almost jammed with people, but I walked alone and probably looked like just another American tourist, carrying my gym bag, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, looking for the next buffet. In fact, I was looking so ragged that I probably looked like a bum. I saw a carnival and a bunch of people along the harbor near the city park. For some reason, that struck a chord in me: a carnival. Chaos and fun. Wild rides. As I crossed the final street, a thought entered my mind and I began to smile.

"You know, I could beat this guy," I thought. "Wouldn't that be a carnival? A wild ride?"

After walking in through the athletes' entrance, I had to be escorted back to the wrestling area. I had gone from thinking I had a chance to actually thinking I'd win. If that happened, everyone but Secretary Kissinger and President Samaranch would join me in orbit.

"If I can go out there and do everything right, I can be successful," I said to myself. I had convinced myself I was going to win. I honestly and truly believed it. I didn't express it publicly, but inside myself, I knew I could open up a whole new world.

I laced up my wrestling shoes and went to work out with my wrestling partner. Prematch workouts get your heart rate up, warm up your muscles, and put you into the right frame of mind to compete. Corey Farkas was still hobbling, but the pushing back and forth got me going. 

Next issue: "What are you going to do after you win the gold medal?"

