

# Bob Backlund Recalls 1971 NCAA Championship Win

By Denny Burkholder, *NCAAsports.com* Staff Writer

**B**ob Backlund showed up a little late to his 1970-71 wrestling season with North Dakota State.

Then, he made up for it.

Unseeded in the NCAA tournament, Backlund went on to win the 1971 NCAA Division II Wrestling Championship at 191 pounds, in front of a hometown crowd at his college.

It was never Backlund's style to be tardy. His legendary work ethic existed even in his college days. In fact, one might say the reason he was late to the wrestling team that year was that he was working too hard. Backlund pulled double-duty as a wrestler and football player on an NDSU team that secured a spot in a bowl game that season, keeping Backlund away from the wrestling mats longer than usual.

"We got to play in a bowl game that year, so I started wrestling after the first of the year," Backlund said. "I didn't have very many matches."

Even with a truncated season, Backlund grappled hard enough to earn a spot in the NCAA tournament. Backlund wasn't even seeded. Usually, that's bad news. Backlund saw it as just another obstacle to conquer. In the finals, Backlund wrestled an opponent from Cal Poly that was expected to

win it all. Backlund still remembers his winning strategy from that day.

"I wrestled a guy from Cal Poly State, and it was in the finals," Backlund recalled. "All during the tournament, I used a single-leg takedown. Everybody knew that that's what I used."

Once he made it to the finals, Backlund changed his game plan and caught his opponent by surprise.

"I bearhugged him and put him on his back," he remembered. "In high school, I used the bearhug in all my matches, just about."

"He didn't know, because I didn't use it until that match. I didn't have a lot of maneuvers," Backlund laughed. "The single leg was my maneuver, and then I was pretty good with a tight-waist, and then I used the bearhug. I didn't get in a lot of trouble, usually. In high school, not too many people scored on me, so I didn't get behind. I didn't have a lot of maneuvers, but it was hard to get points, and try to beat me with points."

Backlund was the second student-athlete from North Dakota State to claim a championship in front of a delighted hometown crowd at the 1971 tournament. Teammate Bill Demaray won the title at 177 pounds

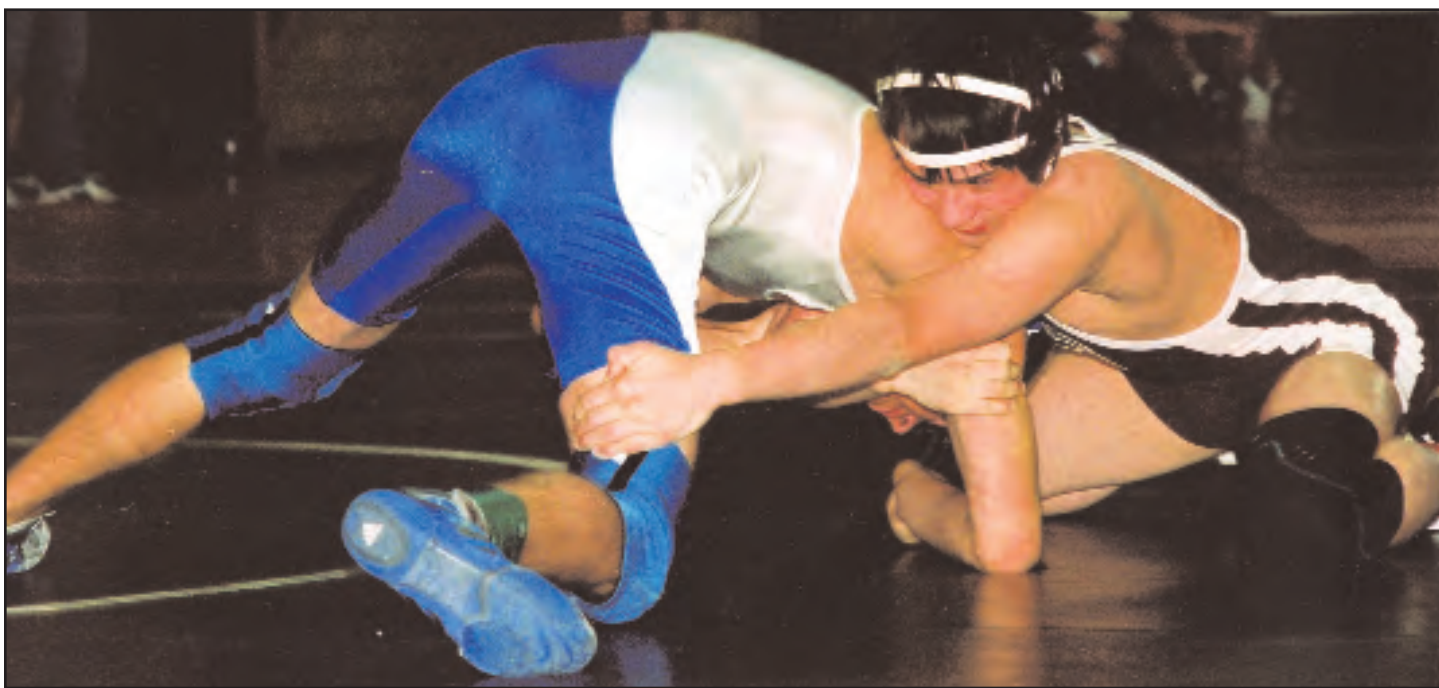
shortly before Backlund's improbable upset.

"That day, I had probably the best day I'd wrestled in my life," Backlund said. "Everything went my way. It was pretty rewarding. The place was pretty full. Everybody was from Fargo, North Dakota, or in that area. It was very rewarding to have that kind of support. Especially after Demaray being the first one, and I was the second. "Backlund devoted many years to perfecting various forms of wrestling. Aside from being a former NCAA champion, Backlund is best remembered as a professional wrestler. He spent many years as a champion and top attraction for the World Wrestling Federation, today known as World Wrestling Entertainment. Just like in college, Backlund's work ethic became a trademark of his professional wrestling career.

Even in high school, Backlund began training hard for success on the amateur circuit. North Dakota State wrestling coach Bucky Maughan, who still coaches the

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Sam Manship, (Sadorus, IL) vs. Matt Nelson (Waukesha, IL) at the Rockford East Open Tournament. Manship defeated Nelson 8-6 to win 3rd place. Photo by Bob Case.





North Dakota - 2005 National Junior Freestyle Championships 130 pound Finals - Adam Frey (PA) decisoned Jordan Frishkorn (VA), 6-4. Photo by Wyatt Schultz.

NDSU team today, got the chance to monitor Backlund's progress.

"When I was in high school - I believe it was when I was a sophomore - he came to our practice," Backlund said. "Then in between my sophomore and my junior year, I got a lot stronger and bigger. I started training, just real hard, when I was a sophomore. I really developed a lot. I got a lot stronger."

Following high school, Backlund went to a junior college for two years. Scouted by several top schools for a spot on the wrestling team, Backlund chose North Dakota State - a place that would allow him to remain a two-sport student-athlete.

"I went off to North Dakota State because they didn't mind me playing football and wrestling," Backlund said. "I talked to the wrestling coach at the University of Minnesota a bunch of times, and a few other colleges too, but they didn't want me to play football. And if I played football, they didn't want me to wrestle. I still liked both sports. And the coach, I had contact with him in high school also, and he kept in touch with me when I was in junior college."

After venturing to North Dakota State,

Backlund recalls training very hard, but saying very little.

"I was a pretty shy young man," Backlund said with a laugh. "I think it was about two weeks before I talked to anybody during football practice. I was pretty much to myself a lot. But I always worked real hard and I always tried to do my best. I didn't slack off or anything. And I think that paid off on the football field and on the wrestling mat. The wrestling was a lot different than in high school. You know, everybody in the college ranks are ex-state champions or something like that. The competition gets a little more intense."

Wrestling is an extremely difficult sport. While Backlund enjoyed both wrestling and football, he feels there was a distinct difference between the two, where experience and conditioning are concerned.

"I was in better shape at the beginning of the season in football than I was at the end," Backlund said. "When I went there, I was in tip-top shape. But you don't stay in shape playing football. You stay in shape for hitting people, and with the helmet, and with the pads. But a play lasts for maybe five seconds, and a game lasts for like two, two-and-a-half hours. It's only

about 14 minutes of play. With wrestling, when you get done wrestling in nine minutes, you're exhausted. I'd be in great condition when football started. To wrestle after I got done with football, I had to kind of get back in shape again. I was in shape to play football, but I wasn't in shape to wrestle, or I wouldn't have been in shape to run track, or play something that's really demanding physically, as far as your heart's concerned."

"It's sort of good for young athletes to be in a team sport, where they work with other people," Backlund said. "But then it's great for them to work in an individual sport. I like wrestling because when you go out into your career, into your life, it's you against everybody else. You can't blame it on anybody else. If you make a mistake, it's your problem. And you have to correct those problems in life, and you have to correct those problems on the wrestling mat. Wrestling, to me, is just like life."

As with life, to be successful in wrestling, you need a good mentor. They don't come much better than NDSU wrestling coach Bucky Maughan.

"Well, you know, Bucky Maughan, he's the coach there now, still," Backlund said. "He was there just a few years before I got there. He graduated from Moorhead State, and I think right out of college, just about, he went to North Dakota State. Or just a few years after. He was pretty young at the time, too. He was almost like a student."

To this day, Backlund thinks very highly of his former coach.

"The coach is somebody that doesn't forget about you," Backlund said. "I called him up ten years later, and he was like I just left the team. If he treats everybody like he's treated me since I graduated from college, it's like I never left the team. If he treats everybody like that, he's gotta be an amazing person. I have a lot of respect for him because of that. Because of the kindness that he has when you call, you know. It's not like he forgets you."

One of Backlund's most talented teammates not only won an NCAA title of his own in 1973, but Brad Rheingans eventually followed Backlund's path into the pro wrestling business. Backlund and Rheingans have both been inducted into the North Dakota State Hall of Fame.

"One of the people that I stay in touch with the most is Brad Rheingans, who wrestled on the team, and then he did very well

after I was gone. But I think he was a sophomore when I was a senior. He actually got into the professional wrestling business."

Backlund ventured into professional wrestling in the mid-1970s, and quickly found himself in the role of top-drawing babyface, entertaining crowds at New York City's Madison Square Garden by thwarting characters such as George "The Animal" Steele, "Superstar" Billy Graham and Don Muraco.

The wrestling business was very good to me," Backlund said. "Vince McMahon, Sr. was a great man. And I want to emphasize the 'Senior' in that."

Many professional wrestlers of Backlund's era hold the elder McMahon - father of current WWE chairman Vince McMahon, Jr. - in high esteem as an honest and fair promoter, but do not get along as well with his son. Backlund says fans may never see him back in the pro wrestling business.

I wouldn't think so, no," he said. Even a spot in the WWE's Hall of Fame is unlikely for Backlund in the near future.

"No, I was asked to do it a couple of years ago, but I have some things that need to be taken care of before I do that," Backlund said. "(Given) the comments made about Mr. McMahon, Sr., you probably under-

stand some of the things that have to be taken care of. Vince McMahon, Sr. had his ways, and Vince McMahon, Jr. has his ways. He does his things for business. But the decisions I make are based on what's good for my family. He's made tons of money."

Fans still remember Backlund fondly. Backlund was happy in professional wrestling, too, which made it difficult for him to find a new occupation when he went on hiatus from the business in 1984.

"I wasn't depressed about life, but I really struggled in trying to look for something that I really liked," Backlund said. "Right now, I have a business where I invest in small businesses, and try to help them become successful. Maybe just motivation, or maybe trying to get them to do it a little bit differently, or whatever their gameplan is in their business. I have about ten businesses that I help out on a day-to-day basis. I help them out in whatever way I can."

In 2000, Backlund even tried politics. He campaigned for a Congressional seat in Connecticut's first district, where he's lived for years.

I had a theory, and I couldn't get the theory to work," Backlund said. "If I could have, I could have won easily. In the first district in the state of Connecticut, there's more people that know me than my oppo-

nent, and everybody agrees with that. And my theory is if I could get them to vote, I could win easily. And I still believe that. I couldn't get them to vote. I don't know if it was because I didn't have enough money... you know, I made \$80,000 selling T-shirts. I sold 8,000 T-shirts. My opponent probably had \$400,000 or a little more. But if I could have got the people that know me to go out and vote, we would have won easily."

Despite his relative success for a newcomer (earning 30 percent of the vote, according to the web site [www.BobBacklund.com](http://www.BobBacklund.com)), politics is another arena we won't likely see Backlund again.

"It took a lot of time," he said. "It took two years of my life. And I really like what I'm doing right now. There was 17 years that I kind of searched for something that I could replace the wrestling business with."

When he's not helping small businesses succeed, Backlund spends his time restoring his classic Corvette. The hard way.

"I bought a Corvette in 1974, and I'm rebuilding it right now," Backlund said. "I started two years ago. And I do all the work myself. I've taken every part of the car off, cleaned it, shined it, sandblasted it, and then I got them ready for somebody else to paint them. And now the frame is together. The motor's on the car. Every part's been redone, and it's new. Now we gotta work on the body, get that back on the car."


Having been a businessman, a politician, and a famous entertainer in his lifetime, Bob Backlund carries the lessons of the sport of wrestling with him to this day. He feels a person can learn a lot from it.

"I think it's one of the most important sports for a young man or a young lady to get into, to prepare them for life," he said.

When you're out in the world, it's one on one. You're against everybody out there. Everybody else is trying for that same job as you are. And that's the same way it is in wrestling. Everybody wants that one spot, and there's only so much room on the team."

Just like he did in 1971 at the NCAA championships, Backlund believes that hard work begets success, both in wrestling and in other ventures.

"It almost parallels life completely," Backlund said of wrestling. "The one that has the most dedication, the most determination, the one that can show up on time and be dedicated, is the one that's gonna succeed the most."

And if you work hard enough, it doesn't even matter where you're seeded. 

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