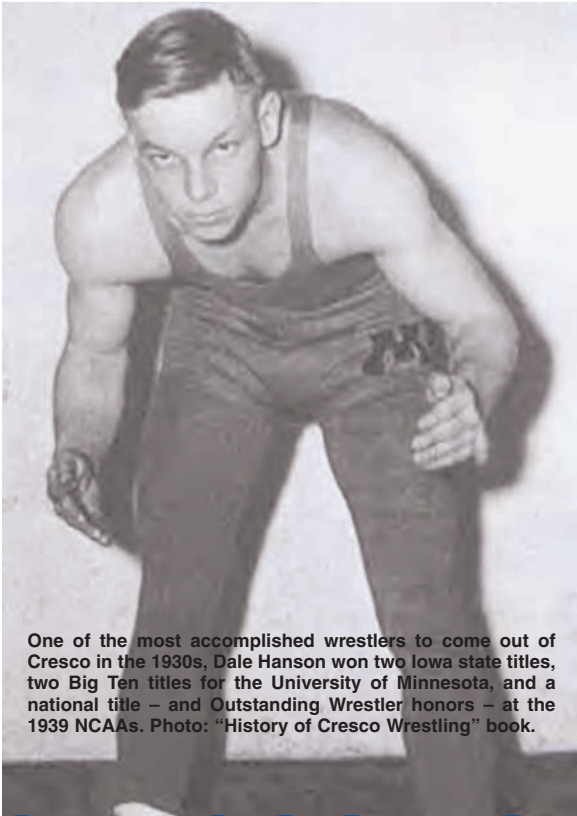


WHERE Are They Now?



One of the most accomplished wrestlers to come out of Cresco in the 1930s, Dale Hanson won two Iowa state titles, two Big Ten titles for the University of Minnesota, and a national title – and Outstanding Wrestler honors – at the 1939 NCAAAs. Photo: "History of Cresco Wrestling" book.



Above: Don Nichols, younger brother of Harold Nichols, was a two-time Iowa state champion, then became the only Cresco High grad to win an NCAA title at the 1940 NCAAAs, shown here as a University of Michigan wrestler.

Below: Norman Borlaug is probably the best-known Cresco wrestler in the world, not for his mat accomplishments, but for his pioneering work in wheat production that fed millions... earning him a Nobel Peace Prize and a Congressional Medal of Honor. He passed away in September 2009 at age 95.

CRESCO, IOWA A Hometown for Wrestling Legends

By Mark Palmer

Most high school wrestling programs can't claim a single NCAA champ... nor have they ever sent anyone to the Olympics.

Yet, the wrestling program in one small Iowa town has produced more than its fair share of national champs and Olympians... along with a couple of college coaches who led their teams to NCAA titles. Not to mention a wrestler who won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Cresco, Iowa is that town.

From the 1920s into the 1960s, this community of 4,000 people in northeast Iowa launched an amazing number of wrestling success stories, producing the wrestler who became Dan Gable's coach at Iowa State (Harold Nichols)... the wrestler who became the coach who hired Dan Gable at Iowa (Gary Kurdelmeier)... and the wrestler who, by feeding the hungry of the world, earned a Nobel Prize (Norman Borlaug).

The Cresco mat legacy was born in 1921, when the high school started its wrestling program. It became a force to be reckoned with in 1925, when Dave Bartelma became head coach. In his first three seasons, Bartelma's teams were undefeated in dual-meet competition... and Cresco's first state champ was crowned.



Dave Bartelma left Cresco for four years, then returned in 1931. Under his leadership in the early and mid 1930s, the Spartans had seventeen individual state champs, and won two team titles.

In 1936, Dave Bartelma left Cresco to become head coach at the University of Minnesota. While coaching the Golden Gophers, Bartelma helped develop high school wrestling in the state of Minnesota.

Even after Bartelma's departure, Cresco's wrestling program experienced three decades of incredible success. Let's look at just some of the all-time greats who once wrestled at Cresco:

Bob Hess: Cresco's first wrestler to compete in any Olympics, Hess, just missed earning a medal at the 1932 Los Angeles Games, placing fourth in freestyle middleweight (174-pound) competition. Hess was a 1932 Big Six champ for Iowa State at 175 pounds, and a two-time NCAA champ in 1932 and 1933.

Norman Borlaug: Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 – and the Congressional Medal of Honor in 2007 -- for developing high-yield wheat that saved countless lives from starvation throughout the world, Bourlaug placed third at 145 lbs at the 1932 Iowa state tournament, then wrestled for the University of Minnesota.

Dale Hanson: A two-time Iowa high school state champ (1934-1935), Hanson headed north to the University of Minnesota, where he was a two-time Big Ten champ (1939-1940) and two-time NCAA finalist, winning the 128-pound title -- and Outstanding Wrestler honors -- at the 1939 NAAs. An Air Force pilot in World War II, Hanson was shot down over the South Pacific in 1942.

1940 NAAs Held at Illinois

Note: For each NCAA All-American, you'll find the wrestler's name, school, hometown and state. All information provided by Ed Ewoldt.

121 lbs.

- 1st Robert Antonacci, Indiana/ Chicago, IL
- 2nd Calvin Mehlhorn, Oklahoma State/ Tulsa, OK
- 3rd Delbert Jensen, Northern Iowa/ Waterloo, IA

128 lbs.

- 1st Harold Byrd, Oklahoma/ Tulsa OK
- 2nd Dale Hanson, Minnesota/ Cresco, IA
- 3rd Bob Kitt, Oklahoma State/ Tulsa, OK

136 lbs.

- 1st Al Whitehurst, Oklahoma State/ Ardmore, OK
- 2nd Roger Issacson, Northern Iowa/ Fort Dodge, IA
- 3rd Joe Roman, Indiana/ Chicago, IL

145 lbs.

- 1st Harold Masem, Lehigh/ Brooklyn, NY
- 2nd William (Bill) Combs, Michigan/ Tulsa, OK
- 3rd Al Schacheman, Franklin & Marshall/ Union City, NJ

155 lbs.

- 1st Vernon Logan, Oklahoma State/ Tulsa, OK
- 2nd Marvin Farrell, Iowa State/ Luverne, IA
- 3rd Harland Danner, Michigan/ Ann Arbor, MI

165 lbs.

- 1st Gene Grenard, Colorado State/ Rocky Ford, CO
- 2nd Clay Albright, Oklahoma State/ El Reno, OK
- 3rd Chauncey McDaniel, Indiana/ Hammond, IN

175 lbs.

- 1st Don Nichols, Michigan/ Cresco, IA
- 2nd Garnett Inman, Indiana/ Bloomington, IN
- 3rd Leon Reynard, Kansas State/ Almo, TX

UNL

- 1st George Downes, Ohio State/ Magnolia, OH
- 2nd George Chiga, Oklahoma State/ Canada
- 3rd John Sikich, Illinois/ Chicago, IL

Team Champion: Oklahoma State

Outstanding Wrestler: Don Nichols, Michigan

Team Championship Title Results:

- 1st Oklahoma State, 24 team points
- 2nd Indiana, 14 team points
- 3rd Michigan, 10 team points
- 4th Ohio State, 7 team points
- 4th Lehigh, 7 team points
- 4th Colorado State, 7 team points
- 7th Northern Iowa, 6 team points
- 7th Minnesota, 6 team points
- 9th Oklahoma, 5 team points
- 9th Iowa State, 5 team points

Distribution of Wrestlers By State: (Number of All-Americans/number of national champions)

Oklahoma: 7/3; Iowa: 5/1; Indiana: 2/0; Colorado: 1/1; Illinois: 3/1; Michigan: 1/0; New York: 1/1; New Jersey: 1/0; Ohio: 1/1; Texas: 1/0; Canada: 1/0

Note: Distribution of Wrestlers By State computations include first through third-place finishers only.

Five of the seven Oklahomans who were All-Americans are Tulsa natives, representing a total of three collegiate programs—Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, and Michigan.

Got a question, comment, or update? Email Ed at edsword5@aol.com.



Ed Ewoldt



Above: Gary Kurdelmeier, seen here as a two-time Iowa state champ for Cresco High School, won Big Ten and NCAA titles at 177 pounds for the University of Iowa in the late 1950s... then served as head coach of the Hawkeyes in the 1970s, hiring Dan Gable as his assistant. Photo: 1954 Spartan yearbook.

Highlights of 1940 NCAAs

The 1940 NCAAs were held at Huff Hall at the University of Illinois in Champaign. Participation levels were up over the previous year; 36 teams sent 111 wrestlers to the two-day championships.

According to Jay Hammond's *The History of Collegiate Wrestling*, Indiana University sent the most wrestlers into the finals; four Hoosiers wrestled for titles. Defending team champ Oklahoma State had two finalists.

At the end of the national championships, only one Indiana wrestler brought home a title – Robert Antonacci, at 121 pounds. By contrast, both Oklahoma State Cowboys won their title bouts – Al Whitehurst won the 136-pound crown, and Vernon Logan at 155. No other school had more than one individual champ. Harold Byrd of the University of Oklahoma won at 128 (upsetting defending champ Dale Hanson of Minnesota); Lehigh's Harold Masem claimed the title at 145... while the 165-pound title went to Gene Grenard of Colorado State. Two Big Ten schools nailed down titles in the upper weight classes: Michigan's Don Nichols – brother of 1939 NCAA champ Harold Nichols – won at 175, and Ohio State's George Downes claimed the heavy-weight title.

Oklahoma State won its fourth straight official team title, with 24 points. Indiana University placed second, with 14 points, and Michigan came in third with 10 points.

Harold Nichols: Although he never won a state title while at Cresco, Harold Nichols is arguably one of the most significant individuals in college wrestling. As a senior at Michigan, he won the 1939 Big Ten and NCAA 145-pound titles. In 1954, he became head coach at Iowa State, where his teams won six NCAA titles. For the 75th anniversary of the NCAA championships, "Nick" was named one of the three all-time great college coaches, along with Oklahoma State's Ed Gallagher, and Iowa's Dan Gable (who he coached at Iowa State).

Don Nichols: Younger brother of Harold, Don Nichols was a two-time Iowa state champ in 1933 and 1935... then, at Michigan, he was a two-time Big Ten champ (1938, 1940) and 1940 NCAA 175-pound titlewinner (and Outstanding Wrestler). After college, Don Nichols was a long-time captain for United Airlines.

Gene Lybbert: A two-time Iowa high school state runner-up in the late 1940s, Lybbert made a name for himself at Iowa State Teachers College (now University of Northern Iowa) where he was a two-time national AAU champ and two-time All-American (1951-1952), winning the 130-pound crown at the 1952 NCAAs. He later was wrestling coach at Blue Earth High School in Minnesota.

Gary Kurdelmeier: A four-sport star at Cresco, Kurdelmeier was a two-time high school heavyweight state champ (1953, 1954)... then was the Iowa Hawkeyes' starter at 177 for three seasons, winning the Big Ten title in 1957, and the NCAA championship in 1958. He became head coach of the Hawkeyes in 1972, building the foundation for today's Iowa dynasty by winning three Big Ten and two NCAA team titles in just four years.

Tom Peckham: Compiling a 49-3 record at Cresco, Peckham brought home three Iowa state titles in 1960-1962... then was recruited by fellow Cresco grad Harold Nichols to wrestle for his Iowa State Cyclones, where he won the 177-pound title at the 1966 Big Eight championships and two NCAA titles in 1965-1966. Peckham wrestled for the U.S. at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, placing fourth in freestyle at 191.5 lbs. 🐾