



2002 MAN-OF-THE-YEAR

Cael Sanderson

By Craig Cooper

From the first summer camp sessions when he saw Cael Sanderson, Iowa State coach Bobby Douglas thought he was seeing a young wrestler who had the potential to do something exceptional.

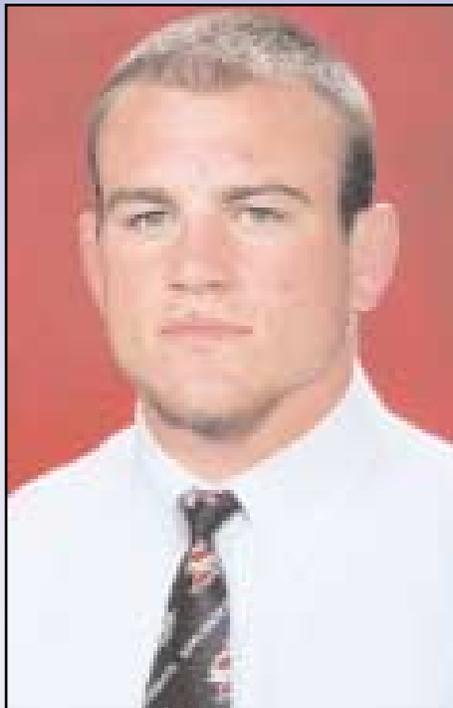
Other kids in the camp at Arizona State, where Douglas was then coaching, were on one page. The kid from Heber City, Utah, the kid from good wrestling stock, was not just chapters, but volumes ahead.

Iowa State's Sanderson distanced himself from the top names in the sport of wrestling last March at the NCAA Division I Championships. Not even the greats like Dan Gable, Bruce Baumgartner, John Smith and Pat Smith wrestled their entire college careers without a loss to a collegiate wrestler. Sanderson finished his career unbeaten. He has become only the second Division I wrestler to win four national titles. Only Pat Smith, who is coaching at Oklahoma State won four NCAA individual championships.

If Sanderson had failed to claim his fourth championship, that also would be historic, too. Upsets of that magnitude become the lore of wrestling. What Douglas saw years ago in Sanderson, thousands of fans at the Pepsi Center, New York City, witnessed.

"We would be working on step one with these young kids and Cael would already be at steps five, six and seven," recalls Douglas, who moved on to Iowa State and hit the recruiting trifecta by landing Cody, Cole and Cael Sanderson. "When we got him in our wrestling room in 1998 (Cael was held out as a redshirt freshman) we knew what we had.

"It's a fantasy to think you will ever have an athlete like Cael. I'm living that fantasy."



For the 159 opponents who have been left in Cael Sanderson's vapor trail, his career has been anything but a fantasy. The beatings have been very real.

For many reasons - family background, physical attributes, mat style and personality among them - Sanderson did something exceptional last March just as Bobby Douglas thought he would.

Around his home in the mountains of Utah, families participate in winter sports with enthusiasm. The Sanderson family's passion was wrestling, first and last.

Cael tried many sports as a kid, just as Gable did, but devoted most of his athletic energy to wrestling at an early age. It was a natural decision. Steve Sanderson was a pretty good college wrestler who coached high school wrestling. Those factors gave his four sons - Cole, Cody, Cael and high schooler

Cyler - opportunities to excel. The wrestling room door was always open to them.

"Probably right away I knew that I could be pretty good in the sport," Cael said recently. "I was lucky that I found success pretty early.

"We played other sports growing up, but once we got into freestyle wrestling, it didn't allow much time for baseball or soccer. It's hard to say how good any of us would have been in other sports because we spent so much time with wrestling."

Cael was younger, but taller, and was able to hold his own in the household battles that would break out in Steve and Debbie Sanderson's home. There was no such thing as an illegal hold or potentially dangerous hold as long as Debbie Sanderson wasn't home.

"She wouldn't allow us to rough-house when she was home. She would kill us," Cael said.

Douglas said Cael's assessment of the family structure is only a slight exaggeration.

"It's a unique family and Debbie is the alpha (leader) of that pack," Douglas said. "Debbie used to wrestle with the boys and she did pretty well."

Douglas and Iowa State benefited from strong family ties. Cole and Cody were already in the Cyclone program when the recruiting battle for Cael began and quickly ended. There was never much doubt in Douglas' mind, or Cael's for that matter, that he would follow his brothers to Ames, Cael admired the wrestling style of Oklahoma State coach John Smith, but the family ties were stronger.

The Sanderson brothers have obvious personality differences. Cole is the most spiritual and is on a Mormon mission. Cody is most outgoing. Cael is quiet, but has a different side off the mat, according to his college coach. Cael