



2003 Master-of-Wrestling Award

Joe Henson

-By John Purnell-

For over 25 years, I have had the privilege of knowing one of the most influential, modest men in wrestling. His lifetime of service to our sport has had a positive impact from the local level right up to the U.S. Olympic Committee and FILA.

Here is a wrestler from Bristow, Oklahoma, who was the first American ever to beat a Soviet at the Olympics, winning a Bronze Medal in Helsinki, in 1952. He produced the first written copy of the international rules for wrestling ever to appear in English, has the lowest FILA referee number of any living American. . . and, in fact, was the first college wrestler to go undefeated (prior to Cael Sanderson), while wrestling for the U.S. Naval Academy. To say there has been an oversight would be an understatement.

If Milan Ercegan, former president of FILA, once described Joe Henson as "the most influential American wrestler in international sports", why is he not included among Oklahoma's greatest wrestlers? Why, in fact, is he not in the U.S. Wrestling Hall of Fame?

I'd like to set the record straight and introduce some of you to Joe Henson, one of Oklahoma's Greatest Wrestlers. This is the kind of guy wrestlers everywhere have reason to be proud of.

Josiah Henson came from Bristow, Oklahoma, to wrestle for the U.S. Naval Academy. Like many of us, Joe came from a "wrestling" family. His older brother Stanley was a three-time Collegiate Champion for Oklahoma A&M, now known as Oklahoma State University. Stanley was the first underclassman ever to be awarded the Outstanding Wrestler award at the National Collegiate Wrestling tournament. Stanley is also a member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. In 1945 Joe was Captain of the Navy team and EIWA champion. Unfortunately, there were no collegiate championships while Joe was in college, due to World War II. Although he finished college in three years



in order to serve his country in war, Henson was actually the first college wrestler never to lose a collegiate match. When the announcer at the 2002 NCAA Championships in Albany declared Cael Sanderson as the only wrestler to go undefeated throughout his entire collegiate career, he may not have known about the two other men to do so. One was Penn's Dick DiBatista and the other, of course, is Joe Henson. The opinion of most who knew him was that Joe probably would have continued his winning streak. For example, when Pennsylvania mat star Gerry Maurey met Leonard Di Augustino in the Collegiate finals in 1953, Joe Henson had already beaten both of them three times each the year before. Joe was described by noted mat historian Don Sayenga as "one of the greats". According to Sayenga, Navy teams of those years were the best in the country. Coached by Hall of Fame coach Ray Schwartz, Henson was Navy's top gun in those days. He wrestled up and down the weight classes to assure the Navy squads of that era went undefeated every year he was on the team in dual competition.

Joe's amazing college record was just a start.

In 1952 he was named "outstanding wrestler" in the AAU nationals. No one scored a point on him in the entire tournament. An obvious Olympic prospect, Henson moved on to the Olympic trials. Members of those impressive Navy teams were a dominant force there and Joe was selected to compete in Helsinki at the 1952 Games. Olympic teammate and Hall of Fame member Dan Hodge (the only wrestler ever to be on the cover of Sports Illustrated), remembers Joe. "He was my mentor on the Olympic squad in '52. Many of us looked to him for leadership. His was the record I wanted to beat. Joe beat everyone, so I made up my mind that I had to pin everyone to be better than Joe." When asked how Joe would stack up to wrestlers today, Hodge had no doubt that, in his prime, Joe could have beat them all. "Nobody could score on him," according to Hodge. Hall of Fame teammate Alan Rice confirmed the assessment when he noted "I wrestled with Joe every day for ten months on the Armed Forces squad and could not score a single point."

When he beat Dadachev, of the Soviet Union, Joe was the first American ever to beat a Soviet wrestler in the Olympic Games. He and Hall of Fame teammate Henry Wittenberg both went undefeated against iron curtain countries, as the US/Soviet Olympic rivalry began to emerge for the first time. They captured headlines in the national press, becoming one of the first, rare media successes for wrestling. Although neither won the gold in '52, Olympic Coach Ray Schwartz noted that they were clearly the best wrestlers there. "Unfortunately, at that time none of the Americans even knew the rules before we got there, unlike today. We were unaccustomed to the defensive, even passive wrestling style of some countries and were completely unaccustomed to the way back points were scored in those days."

Four years later, when the Navy assigned him to the Naval Academy in



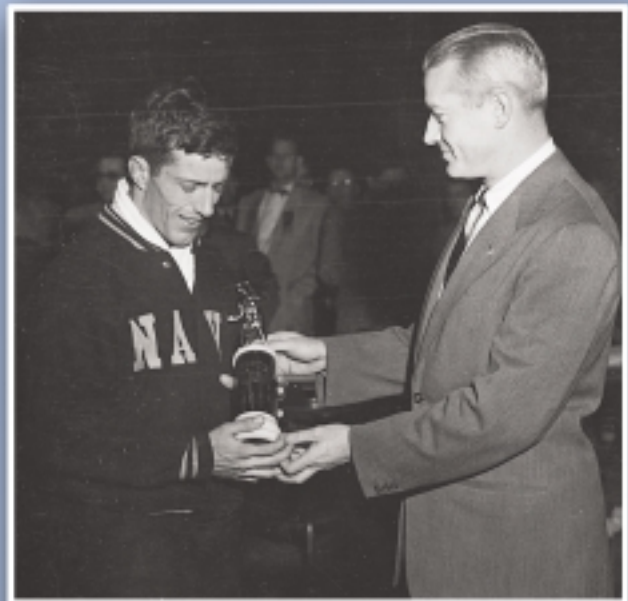
Henson at the Naval Academy



Henson reviewing Naval Squad



Henson with Russian at Olympic Games



Henson being given the Outstanding Wrestler Award at the IOWA



Henson receiving award from President Reagan



Henson with Castro at the Pan American Games

1956 to enable him to try once more for the games and work with the other wrestlers. Joe's experience made a difference. Now 34 years old and not having wrestled for four years, Joe did not make the team but did accompany the team to Sidney, Australia. Remembering the problems that U.S. wrestlers had faced in 1952 from not understanding the rules in force, Joe got involved with refereeing and produced the first written copy of the international rules ever to appear in English. Incidentally, one of those Navy teams included longtime friend, future White House Chief of Staff and our current Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld.

After graduation from college, Joe had gone on to become a decorated military officer and make his career in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a Captain. A married father of three, he became a pilot and, among other accomplishments, commanded the squadron that later achieved note by intercepting the terrorists who attacked the Achille Lauro cruise liner in the Mediterranean.

Members of the Baltimore YMCA, where Joe trained after college, remember he invented his own special move that was "so fast you could not figure out what happened." Eventually, renowned technique expert and Granby High School wrestling coach Billy Martin, Sr. (father of the Granby roll) asked Joe to show it to him and used it successfully for years, calling it simply "the Henson take-down." Later Granby began to call it the "shrug."

Joe remained involved in the sport he loved even after his days of competition had ended. While on a military assignment to the American Embassy in Paris, Joe became personal friends with French FILA president Roger Colon. He established himself in a position to advocate for the American position within the international political circles. When U.S. FILA member Al DeFerreri was visiting in France, Joe took the opportunity to invite him to dinner with FILA president Colon and visiting FILA Vice President Hatta of Japan. There Joe convinced them that FILA should adopt the "controlled" fall, rather than the touch or roll fall that had been difficult for the Americans to grasp. DeFerreri later called it simply "the most important rule change ever made for the Americans."

As his influence with FILA folks on behalf of American wrestlers took hold, one of the pioneer things he did was to register American referees with FILA for the first time. His skill at building relationships and respect for his ongoing input kept Joe moving up in the ranks of American top administrators. By the time he retired, he had refereed in four Olympic Games and been America's first Mat Chairman during the Games. In terms of seniority, Joe Henson today has the lowest FILA referee number of any living American.

When he retired from the Navy, Captain Joe became increasingly involved with FILA as an advocate for American interests and became the second American ever to receive the FILA Gold Star, international wrestling's top administrative honor. He has maintained a lifelong friendship of over fifty years with recent FILA president Milan Ecergan, who once described Joe Henson as "the most influential American wrestler in international sports."

Joe Henson is one of those rare individuals who excelled in every facet of the sport. In addition to being a top athlete and official, he was also an outstanding coach and administrator. Wrestling interests became Joe's post Navy career. Always an innovator, he put his entrepreneurial spirit into wrestling-related business pursuits. Long before Gatorade and other sport drinks became popular, Joe was inspired by the research of his brother, the previously mentioned prominent doctor and Hall of Fame Wrestler Stanley Henson, on electrolyte loss in wrestlers. He created the first electrolyte balanced drink for wrestlers, called "Champ Ade." The product was discontinued after commercial energy drinks became more widely developed and marketed. Hall of Fame Outstanding American Art Rutzen of Lehigh says, "I remember drinking Champ Ade. It's all we had in those days."

Uniforms and equipment were limited then, too. Annoyed by the fact that American wrestlers were ignored by the sporting goods industry, Henson started supplying equipment, initially through a mail order business. Wrestling equipment was hard to find in this country for years and there were few retailers, other than Cliff Keen and Joe Henson, both of whom started out of the basements of their homes.

In the late 1970s, in an effort to bring creative design and modern technology to the sport, Henson partnered with John Purnell to found BRUTE wrestling. The two came up with the very first colored wrestling shoes, featured in red, green, blue and black (with yellow). Supported by Joe Henson's interest and initiative, the new company gave wrestling the very first Lycra singlets and patented numerous improved designs for earguards over the years.

Joe continued to remain involved internationally in sports government. He often made use of his position to assist in providing sporting equipment to underdeveloped countries. Along the way, he obtained his Master's Degree in International Relations from George Washington University, in Washington D.C., just outside Northern Virginia where he now resides.

Josiah Henson's list of contributions to wrestling over a lifetime includes serving on the U.S. Olympic Committee's Board of Directors for 4 Olympiads. He has participat-

ed in every Olympics since 1952 in an official capacity, including as Special Assistant to the U.S.O.C. president at two Olympic and two Pan American games. His contributions to sport extend beyond wrestling. In 1980, he was elected President of the multi-sport AAU (the only wrestling person other than Joe Scalzo to serve in that capacity). He received a special commendation from President Reagan for his contributions to American sports.

Long before the Olympic scandals surrounding Salt Lake City, Joe Henson was a strong advocate of ethical responsibility within the Olympic movement and to this day is known for his personal integrity. In 1992, as a matter of principle, he challenged controversial New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner for the vice presidency of the U.S. Olympic Committee. He lost a surprisingly close election after being quoted in the national media to the effect that he did not think a convicted felon should be an officer of the U.S.O.C. Steinbrenner angrily replied to the press that he had been pardoned by the President.

Joe, tenacious as ever, responded calmly by simply conceding that indeed Steinbrenner had been pardoned . . . but repeated that it was for felonies committed. Pardons don't erase felonies. It just means that you apologized and the apology was accepted.

Joe Henson should be noted for his wrestling accomplishments, for his leadership in advocating for American interests in the international wrestling community, for his impact on the development of rules, equipment and uniforms, and for his philanthropy. His efforts were recognized by being named the "Amateur Wrestling Man of the Year" in 1967. But maybe his biggest contribution to wrestling may, in fact, be his continued involvement as a man of admirable character. He achieved so many remarkable accomplishments that all said, would fill another page of this magazine. Still remaining are an innumerable amount of positions, awards, commendations, accreditations, accomplishments, decorations and honors that he carries ever so quietly in his back pocket. He is a champion with a heart for his sport and a demonstrated commitment to giving back. He is the kind of person who represents wrestling with intelligence and grace.

The wrestling community should be proud to recognize Josiah Henson, now 81 years young, for his lifetime of accomplishment and major contributions in the evolution of our sport. Here's to Josiah Henson being inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, not just as one of Oklahoma's greatest wrestlers, but one of America's greatest wrestlers.