

## Don Manley, '57



Before the present-day World Wrestling Federation (WWF), there existed a horde of individuals who traveled the globe performing as “professional wrestlers.” Although the closest they came to wrestling was their sleight of hand in making the unsuspecting actually believe they were tolerating such grievous punishment, this band of canvas gypsies mesmerized little boys as well as most adults.

The likes of Gorgeous George, Gorilla Monsoon, Haystacks Calhoun, Yukon Eric, Verne Gagne, Killer Kowalski, Bobo Brazil, Bruno Sammartino, Dick the Bruiser and scores more were household names. They graced not only our infantile televisions, but the tabloids and even well-respected magazines such as “Life”, “Look” and “The Saturday Evening Post”. These modern-day P.T. Barnums were as much a stalwart of the 1950s as Ike (Eisenhower), Mickey (Mantle), Elvis (Presley) and Marilyn (Monroe), because they embodied the comic book heroes we loved—Superman, Batman, the Green Lantern, the Flash and many, many more of those masked and caped do-gooders. But, there was one problem—they were a big fat FAKE. Entertaining, maybe? But, no doubt a fake.

Locally, however, a young teenager by the name Don Manley was compiling real grappling records, testimonials that stand to this day. Manley, who graduated in 1957, began his wrestling career as an untested freshman in 1953 – just 22 years after Frank Giltner started the program in 1935. Over the next four seasons all Manley did was post a 67-2 record en route to four Iroquois League titles, three Section 3 crowns and an intersectional championship – the latter of which was equivalent to a state crown at the time. For those reasons, he has been chosen as a member of the fourth induction class of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

Growing up on a small non-working farm at the top of Polkville Hill – near the Burdick-Medbury Road – Manley got his first taste of grappling fever by watching older brother Bruce compete. That older brother, by some six years, captured the 103-pound Section 3 title in 1949, so he was an excellent teacher.

“I used to watch him all the time,” recalled Manley. “So, along with my best buddy, Joe Binelli, we decided we were going to be wrestlers, too.”

Stoked by that wrestling fire, Manley and Binelli talked their elementary school gym teacher at East Main Street

School into getting some mats. And, thus was born the start of a great career.

“There were no pee wee programs and such, so that’s how we got started,” said Manley. “By the time we got to junior high school, Coach (Sam) Elia let both of us practice with the big guys.”

That early determination to improve his skills and the day-to-day practices with the seasoned varsity did not go unnoticed in the Norwich community. One day prior to his first varsity match, *Norwich Sun* Sports Editor Bob Van Tine wrote a very prophetic column of the “freshman sensation” on the eve of the Purple’s showdown with Oneonta.

“Don is the brother of former ace Bruce Manley and has been an ardent mat follower since he was eight,” wrote Van Tine. “This interest should start paying dividends for him and for Norwich.”



So, on Saturday night, Dec. 5, 1953, Manley stepped onto the mats to meet the highly-rated Yellowjacket senior Roger Proulx in a 127-pound bout. In what was described as “the most exciting match of the evening,” Manley disposed of his Oneonta foe 12-5 for his initial taste of victory.

“I was scared to death, because I was up against a very good senior,” admitted Manley.

Unfortunately for Norwich, however, the Yellowjackets scored three pins to the Purple’s one as each school recorded five wins in Oneonta’s 21-17 triumph. That loss was the first ever for NHS in the Iroquois League as the Tornado went 10-0 during the inaugural 1952-53 season. Norwich wouldn’t lose another league match until Ilion slowed the Purple juggernaut 24-18 during the 1956-57 campaign, a triumphant streak that reached 29 straight.

Following that successful debut, Manley chalked up his first pin with a 52-second stick of Little Falls’ Warner with a half nelson and arm bar in their 120-pound go-round. Again, Van Tine saw the writing on the wall. “The strong frosh ace appears to be one of the best first-year men

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NHS has had and seems destined to take his place with the school's all-time mat greats."

Manley did not let Van Tine's words fall upon deaf ears as he ran roughshod through the remainder of the Iroquois season, and capped that memorable frosh campaign with a 3-0 victory over Carr of Watertown in the 123-pound Section 3 finals at Rome. Manley, who recorded two pins and two decisions in the annual event, was the lone Tornado grappler to achieve victory as Norwich wound up second overall in the 21-school tourney.

With no intersectionals scheduled for the close of the '54 campaign, the brilliant frosh put a bit of icing on his season with three wins at the annual Eastern AAU Tournament in Troy on Saturday, April 3. With Manley's completion of an unblemished 20-0 season, and individual championships from Tornado teammates Ken Brooker (112), Ronnie Steward (157), Al Scheer (167) and Leon Gridley (177), the Don Collier-coached matmen produced a decisive victory with 33 points to second-place Rome's 18.

That initial success was followed by two seasons in which Manley tasted defeat by the narrowest of margins—both matches ending in draws—with his foes being declared victors by referee decisions. But, as he began his illustrious Norwich career, so did he finish it, as he rang up another 20-0 campaign during his senior year. That season and his Tornado career were punctuated with a 4-2 triumph over John Babcock of Massena in their 136-pound match in the intersectional competition between Section 3 and Section 10 at Watertown. Selected to be Section 3's captain by his peers, Manley led all the way, with Babcock securing two points late in the third period as the Norwich grappler tried for a pin.

Prior to that final triumph, Manley won his third sectional title in four tries with a victory over Holland Patent's Drietzler as he was voted the Outstanding Wrestler of the Year in Section 3. And, he completed a perfect Iroquois League run with a fourth straight league crown as he posted an unblemished 48-0 log. At the conclusion of the 1956-57 season, Manley was chosen to the prestigious Rome Free Academy "All Opponents Team" at 136 pounds. He was joined by his long-time teammate and classmate Binelli at 141. Completing the squad were wrestlers from Watertown (three), Auburn and Oneida with two picks each and Camden (one.)

"The first time I ever saw him wrestle, I knew he was going to be great. He was by far the best wrestler I observed at Norwich," noted former teammate and close friend Tom Farrell. "His moves were like Minnesota Fats playing pool—he was thinking at least one or two moves ahead if his opponent was lucky enough to counter his first move. He was built perfect for wrestling – long, sinewy arms; fast

and smooth. He never gave up a back point, and lost one controversial takedown in his career."

Manley agreed that speed was one of his main fortes, but emphasized that his approach depended on the match. "We practiced so much, everything was instinctive. And, when I got older and more confident, I took it to a new level by playing mind games with my opponent."

Fellow teammate Jim Edwards echoed Farrell's views. "I have watched wrestling at Norwich since 1948, and, in my opinion, Don Manley was one of the best wrestlers in school history. He was the most dominant wrestler in Section 3 at the time. He was viewed as unbeatable, which he virtually was, by his peers. He had a great combination of speed and strength. He was a blur on his feet, just so quick. He was a machine, a pleasure to witness."

Ironically, Norwich, which went 8-2-1 and 8-1-1, respectively, during Manley's two bookend 20-0 campaigns, posted identical 10-0 marks his sophomore and junior years when he suffered his lone two defeats. In establishing those two unblemished seasons, Coach Elia matched his success of 1952-53 when the Tornado christened the new Iroquois League with a 10-0 log, and matched Coach Cy Seymour's 9-0 exploits back in 1938-39.

And, Manley remembers the days of tutelage under Coach Elia fondly. "He was a great coach, knew his stuff and gave it his all. But, more importantly, he was the perfect role model, and that was scarce. He may have been the only role model I had as a young fellow."

Following his debut frosh season, Manley showed little signs of slowing down as he pinned Frank Luppino of Mohawk in 22 seconds during the Purple's second match of his sophomore year. And, over the next 10 weeks, he racked up win after win as Norwich won its third straight Iroquois crown on February 26, 1955 when he stuck Oneonta's D. Richardson in 5:10 of their 130-pound go-round. The Tornado easily outdistanced runner-up Little Falls 50-27 in team points.

"Although only a sophomore, the classy bonebender figures to become one of the school's all-time mat greats," predicted "Sun" Sports Editor Van Tine.

But, that unblemished, 31-match skein came to a halt two weeks later when Auburn's McCarthy eked out a 3-2 referee's decision over the Norwich stalwart in the Section 3 tourney at the Laurel Street Junior High School in Rome. "I had a bad sprained ankle, but decided that for the team I should wrestle," said Manley. "My speed, balance and confidence were all greatly reduced due to the ankle. Although we tied 2-2, McCarthy (the Most Outstanding Wrestler of the tourney) had time advantage, so he was declared the winner."

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Farrell, a junior at the time, remembers the heartbreaking loss well. "I tried to talk him out of competing. His ankle was so swollen and he was sick to his stomach. But, his answer was I have to wrestle for coach (Elia) and the team. That's the kind of person Don was and still is."

In a column following Manley's defeat, Van Tine opined, "It was a tough blow but Don is made of strong stuff and we are sure he'll come bouncing back in the next two years to run up a four-year mark that few will ever equal."

Manley returned to victory lane on December 3, 1955 with a 1:12 pin of Oneonta's John Mouyos at 133 as the Purple began their march to a fourth straight league title with a 42-4 stinging of the Yellowjackets. And, six days later, as Van Tine put it, "Norwich ran roughshod over a highly-rated Little Falls squad" by a 41-3 count, with Manley planking Irving Herringshaw in a scant 34 seconds.

Subsequently, the Purple went on to wrap up that aforementioned fourth straight Iroquois crown by capturing six out of 10 bouts in piling up 60 team points to second-place Ilion's 37 in action at Mohawk. Manley added his third league title in as many tries with a decision over Robert King of Ilion.

Having not raised the sectional trophy since the 1946-47 season, when the Tornado was part of Section 4, Norwich chimed in with 51 points to outdistance runner-up Sauquoit and two-time defending champion Watertown, which posted 37 and 32 markers, respectively. And, Manley avenged his heartbreaking defeat of a year earlier when he decisioned Auburn's Schneider in the finals that early March day in Rome.

But, as heartbreaking as that "riding time" defeat was a season earlier, nothing could match the sheer travesty that awaited Manley at the intersectionals in Watertown. Pitted against Gerald Bouvier of Massena, the Norwich junior literally had victory stolen from him. Locked in a 1-1 battle, the two wrestlers were told that whoever exhibited the most effort in scoring a takedown in the final period would be declared the winner.

"I wrestled aggressively for the rest of the match and was confident I would be declared the winner," recalled Manley. "The referee went back to the scoring table and conferred with the scorekeepers. He came back out on the mat and lifted up my opponents' arm, signifying he was the victor. I was stunned. Later, while driving home, Coach Elia told me the referee admitted to him that he made a big mistake, because he got us mixed up and raised the wrong wrestler's arm."

So, instead of compiling a perfect 69-0 record, Manley had to settle for a pair of losses by a combined two points. "I could have gone four years undefeated in the state, but I think the Lord wanted to keep me humble," said Manley,

who is now a Baptist minister in Oxford, FL.

Following his glory days at Norwich, Manley was offered a scholarship to Syracuse University and was subsequently given the opportunity to expand that free ride to anywhere in the country by legendary coach Clyde "Whitey" Cole, who saw him compete in the intersectionals his senior year. Cole, who coached at Oxford from 1936-46 was Bureau Chief for Physical Education and Recreation at the New York State Education Department in Albany at the time.

"He said he'd give me a recommendation to any college in the country, but I just wasn't interested to go," admitted Manley. "Graduating from high school was enough for me at the time."

Eventually, Manley relocated to Florida in 1966, and invested in a Chicago-based convenience store chain in Coral Gables. But, a year later his life was changed faster than one of his pins a decade earlier. "I was watching a Billy Graham Crusade on television (June 1967) and his message got to me. It changed my life by giving me direction," said Manley. "So, in January 1968, with two kids and another on the way, I became a 28-year-old freshman at Florida Bible College in Miami. And, it's been an awesome experience ever since."

Awesome, indeed! Manley followed up his Bachelor of Arts degree with a masters from Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA and later became Dr. Manley when he was awarded his Ph.D. from Trinity Seminary in Newburgh, IN. The author of several articles, lecture materials and two well-received books, Dr. Manley is the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oxford, a parish of about 250 parishioners not far from The Villages in the north central region of the state.

The Norwich wrestling star is married to the former Anne Thomsen of South New Berlin, and together they have three grown children—Christie, Randy and Dana. Randy, the middle child, is following in his father's footsteps twofold. Not only is he the pastor of the Molokai Baptist Church in Hawaii, but has been the wrestling coach at the local high school for the past 10 years.

So, from his humble beginnings at the top of Polkville Hill, Don Manley achieved what most of us can only dream about—athletic immortality as he led his Norwich grapplers to a four-year, 36-3-2 record – a log that included four Iroquois League crowns, a Section 3 championship and a pair of runner-up finishes, plus a third. And with his wrestling career well behind him, he now influences the lives of hundreds at his Florida church. Unlike those much-regaled showmen of a half century ago, Dr. Don Manley is the REAL deal.

Welcome to the club!

*Manley's quickness, strength recalled  
by NHS teammate*

*One of Don Manley's closest friends and a three-year teammate of his on the Norwich wrestling team—Tom Farrell—remembers two occasions in which he stunned a captive audience.*

*"One time the old Norwich gym was set up for a girls' apparatus exhibition. Don went over to the horse and did a routine that looked like an Olympic competition. He also shocked Coach Elia on the ropes and poles in gym class. Coach had me keeping time for climbing to the top of the gym and back down. He turned his back to observe someone else, while I was watching Don. He said go, and by the time the person he was observing got to the top, Don was back on the ground. Coach said to me, as he turned back around, tell Don to go. I said he just did. His time was something like four or five seconds. Coach thought we were pulling his leg, so Don did it again. Coach Elia could only shake his head."*

*—Tom Rowe*