

Beyond a Rivalry

Nearly 50 years ago, a gesture of true sportsmanship helped trump Mike Caruso's NCAA title trifecta over Bob Fehrs

By Kyle Klingman

Three consecutive losses at the NCAA wrestling tournament finals to the same opponent could have devastated a normal person. But Bob Fehrs isn't normal. The former Michigan Wolverine doesn't understand how to quit.

On the surface, Fehrs' college wrestling story ends in disappointment. As a sophomore, the 123-pound standout lost to Lehigh's Mike Caruso in the 1965 NCAA tournament finals, 8-5.

As a junior, he lost to Caruso in the finals a second time, 9-6.

As a senior, Fehrs nearly pulled off the upset, but dropped a 7-6 match when Caruso secured riding time.

So, history will say that Caruso was a three-time NCAA champion who won 123-pound titles at the NCAA wrestling tournament in 1965, 1966 and 1967. It will also show that Fehrs was a runner-up those same years at the same weight class.

How could that happen? How could Caruso and Fehrs face each other three times in their careers ... and all three times happened to be in the NCAA tournament finals?

Their improbable journey actually began in high school. Caruso attended St. Benedict's Prep School in N.J., and Fehrs attended Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pa.

St. Benedict's entered a national prep tournament at Lehigh University during Caruso's junior year. Nobody knew much about St. Benedict's since it was the first year they entered the tournament, but they won the team championship with three individual champions.

Caruso won the 106-pound weight class. Fehrs won the 115-pound weight class. Caruso and Fehrs were side by side in the champions picture taken after the tournament. And naturally, they struck up a brief conversation.

Both teams attended the Lehigh tournament the following year. Caruso moved up to 115 pounds and Fehrs moved up to 123 pounds. They both won again as seniors.

Caruso, it should be mentioned, is hyper competitive. His goal as a senior was to pin every wrestler he faced and to win the Outstanding Wrestler Award at every tournament. His overall prep record was 81-0, with a senior season of 21-0 with 17 falls. He was the Outstanding Wrestler at the New Jersey prep tournament, pinning everyone he wrestled.

The national prep tournament at Lehigh saw Caruso pin his first three opponents before securing a 6-0 win over a wrestler from Milton Hershey in the finals. Fehrs won by defeating a wrestler from Norfolk Prep.

Fehrs and Caruso faced each other for the first time in



While Mike Caruso (far left) was happy to win a third straight NCAA title in 1967, the Lehigh wrestler took a moment to hold the hand of Michigan's Bob Fehrs, who lost a third straight final to Caruso.

the Outstanding Wrestler Award voting. Every single vote for was cast for either Caruso or Fehrs.

Fehrs won by two votes.

After the tournament, Caruso's coach prophetically told his star pupil that there was something bigger in store waiting for him at the next level.

Several weeks later, both wrestlers roomed together during a recruiting visit to Navy. They wrestled each other for the first time during a practice. They probably only wrestled for a few minutes, with neither wrestler gaining a significant advantage, but it laid the groundwork for what was to come.

Caruso went to Lehigh; Fehrs attended Michigan. Both would become eternally linked.



It's been 48 years since Mike Caruso (left) and Bob Fehrs met in a third NCAA final, but the two rivals are now friends and met at Lehigh in 2014.

Freshmen were ineligible to compete in 1964, which meant both wrestlers had to wait until the 1965 season to wrestle varsity. At that time the NCAA tournament didn't have qualification procedures so no one knew who exactly would show up.

"Nationals were in Laramie, Wyoming, my sophomore year," said Caruso. "I'm walking to the weigh-ins and I see him. I said 'Bob, you look a little drawn, are you at 115?' He said 'No, 123, how about you?' I said 123. Then we smiled at each other.

"We get to the finals and it's myself and Bob and I won the match. The next year I won 9-6. I kept thinking 'I wonder if I could wrestle someone else in the finals because I sure don't want to wrestle Bob Fehrs again.' And who would have ever known we were going to wrestle three years? Ever. It's never happened before in NCAA history and it has never happened since."

The third and final match provided the most drama. Caruso was up 4-0 early, leading many to believe that this would be the easiest match of the three. But Fehrs battled back. Lehigh's two-time NCAA champion was up by one point with 30 seconds remaining in the match.

"My mental thoughts were that this was the last chance," said Fehrs. "I've been able to overcome obstacles in getting to here but this is the last obstacle. From that standpoint going into the match I felt reasonably confident I could win. I didn't go into it thinking that he's beat me twice so here we go again. This was my chance and I really believed I could win."

Caruso took a shot and Fehrs pancaked him for a two-point takedown. However, Fehrs hit the shot so hard that Caruso rolled through the move. Had he pancaked him lighter, Fehrs may have secured back points and his first NCAA

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championship.

Caruso earned an escape to tie the score at 6-6, but there was riding time.

“In those days, riding was kept on clocks,” said Caruso. “You didn’t know if you had riding time. All I kept thinking was ‘I don’t want to go back out’. When they raised my hand, it was a relief and we hugged each other.

“After the tournament, I told Bob that he could have walked through the weight if he had gone up to 130. Why did you stay at 123? His classic quote was ‘If I would have done that I would have to admit to myself that I couldn’t beat you, and I never believed that.’ That sums up Bob. He’s not one to take the easy way out. He never was a quitter in his life, even to this day.”

Becoming the first three-time NCAA champion in program history should have been cause for celebration for Caruso, but it wasn’t. He felt somewhat relieved and somewhat sad that his fiercest rival would never have an opportunity to win the NCAA tournament.

Caruso looked down at Fehrs during the awards ceremony and noticed he was crying. The tears were pouring from his face. That’s when Caruso reacted by reaching over and holding his hand. Fehrs responded by gripping Caruso’s hand tight, and then Caruso reached over with his other hand and held the grip for a couple minutes.

The result was one of the most iconic photographs in wrestling.

“Some of these things are reactionary,” said Caruso about gripping Fehrs’ hand. “You don’t even know you’re doing it. So that’s what occurred. I have had more people in the last 48 years, people I don’t even know, call me and ask for a copy of that photo. That photograph is my screensaver. It always has been. I have one in my home too.

“When they got to Bob and gave him his second place award, it was one of the loudest ovations you’d ever hear. His

Back Together Again in the NCAAs

While Mike Caruso and Bob Fehrs are the only wrestlers to meet in three NCAA finals, there have been several match-ups of athletes who met twice for a national tournament championship.

The following are some of those two-time meetings:

- **Dale Anderson (Michigan State) & Masaru Yatabe (Portland State)** — The Spartan won both 137-pound meetings: 6-6, 3-2 in 1967 and 9-5 in 1968.
- **Lee Kemp (Wisconsin) & Kelly Ward (Iowa State)** — The Badger won both meetings at 158 pounds; 9-5 in 1977 and 10-8 in 1978.
- **Dan Chaid (Indiana) & Duane Goldman (Iowa)** — Twice meeting at 190 pounds, Chaid beat Goldman in 1985, but the Hawkeye returned the favor by winning by 5-4 in 1986.
- **Terry Brands (Iowa) & Jason Kelber (Nebraska)** — A sophomore in 1990, Brands beat Kelber, 3-2, at 126. The Husker prevailed 10-5 in the 1991 final. Brands returned to win a second championship over Shawn Charles of Arizona State in the 1992 final.
- **Jeff Prescott (Penn State) & Chad Zaputil (Iowa)** — The Lion won both titles at 118 pounds: 14-0 in 1991 and 2-0 in 1992. Zaputil also lost the ‘93 final to Sam Henson (Clemson).
- **Don Pritzlaff (Wisconsin) & Joe Heskett (Iowa State)** — The Badger won both 165-pound finals in 2000 (4-2 ot) and 2001 (3-1 ot). Heskett won the 2002 final over Matt Lackey of Illinois.
- **Johnny Thompson (Okla. St.) & Ryan Lewis (Minn.)** — The Cowboy, a 2001 runner-up to Iowa’s Eric Juergens, won both title bouts at 133 pounds over the Gopher: 5-4 in 2002 and 5-3 in 2003. Thompson finished third in 2004.

head moved up slightly...slightly...slightly. He took a pretty good look out at everyone. He respected the crowd because they honored him.”

The loss was particularly devastating for Fehrs. For at least 15 years after the match, he had nightmares about wrestling. The nightmares weren’t about wrestling Caruso; they were about getting beat before reaching the finals.

“I am well beyond losing those matches,” said Fehrs. “Mike and I are friends, even though we don’t see each other as often as I’d like. As I think back on it, part of what it did for me was to say even if you can’t be the champion you have to be able to hold your head up and you have to do the best you can.”

There is also the story very few people know.

The first year of the East-West All-Star meet was to be held in Stillwater, Okla., two weeks after the 1967 NCAA tournament. Caruso’s coach, Gerry Leeman, and Fehrs’ coach, Cliff Keen, were chosen to be coaches for the East team. Harold Nichols (Iowa State) and Myron Roderick (Oklahoma State) were coaches for the West.

Leeman and Keen approached Caruso about participating at the All-Star meet. Caruso looked at them and said, “Is Bob going to go?”

Only one wrestler could compete at the weight class, and Caruso refused to wrestle if Fehrs wasn’t there. Lehigh’s only three-time NCAA champion finally came up with a solution: Fehrs would wrestle at 123 pounds and he would wrestle at 130 pounds. Both would be captains of the team.

Caruso and Fehrs were part of a 19-17 win for the East. Fehrs tied Portland State’s Rick Sanders, 2-2, who wrestled up a weight. Sanders was already a two-time NCAA champion and a medalist at the World Championships. Caruso defeated Jim Hanson of Colorado, 6-3.

“Losing is not terrible,” said Caruso. “Even the best have to lose sometime. Quitting after you lose is what’s terrible. Wrestlers like Bob Fehrs don’t know how to spell the word.” ■

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development pipeline where Team USA will challenge to win the World titles year in and year out.”

All-American Ian Miller of Kent State is another very gifted freestyler. The explosive Miller, who has an assortment of big throws in his arsenal, scored a pair of stunning falls over Tyler Caldwell at the 2014 University Nationals. Caldwell went on to win a University World title last year.

There are numerous other college wrestlers who can make an impact on the Senior level as well, including 2014 Junior World bronze medalists Gabe Dean of Cornell, Adam Coon of Michigan and Thomas Gilman of Iowa.

Cornell’s Nahshon Garrett, who competed in the Beat the Streets Dual last year, is another wrestler with an abundance of potential at the freestyle level. All-American Earl Hall of Iowa State is a past Junior World Teamer who took Olympic gold medalist Henry Cejudo down at the 2012 Olympic Trials.

Virginia Tech standout Devin Carter won the Dave Schultz Memorial during his redshirt season. Two-time NCAA champion Jesse Delgado of Illinois also is very good at freestyle. NCAA champion Jason Tsirtsis of Northwestern is a past Junior World Team member as well.

And don’t forget Penn State wrestlers Nico Megaludis and Zain Retherford, who are redshirting this year. Megaludis and Retherford have both placed in Senior events. Retherford

still has three years of college eligibility left, but he looked very strong in placing fourth at the Dave Schultz Memorial International in January.

Then you have Joey McKenna, who hasn’t even started college yet. McKenna just won the Senior-level Cerro Pelado International in Cuba. McKenna is just 19 years old, and he has committed to wrestle for Stanford next season. McKenna won a Junior World silver medal in 2014 and has a chance to make a Senior World Team this year at 61 kg/134 lbs.

And then there’s 18-year-old Aaron Pico, the Cadet World champion and Junior World silver medalist, who also won the Cerro Pelado in Cuba. Pico bypassed his final three high-school seasons to focus on freestyle. It would’ve been fun to see him on the college level, but he’s a special case who very well could be on the 2015 Senior World Team.

We may not see him after college, but Minnesota senior Dylan Ness was a force in Greco-Roman and freestyle wrestling at the Junior levels. Ness was particularly dominant on the Greco mats at the Cadet and Junior Nationals in Fargo.

Wisconsin sophomore Jesse Thielke has already made a Senior World Team. He placed eighth at the 2013 Senior World Championships in Greco after winning a Junior World bronze medal the year before.

The good news for wrestling in the United States is that the college system is definitely helping prepare athletes for the Senior level. ■