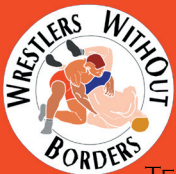
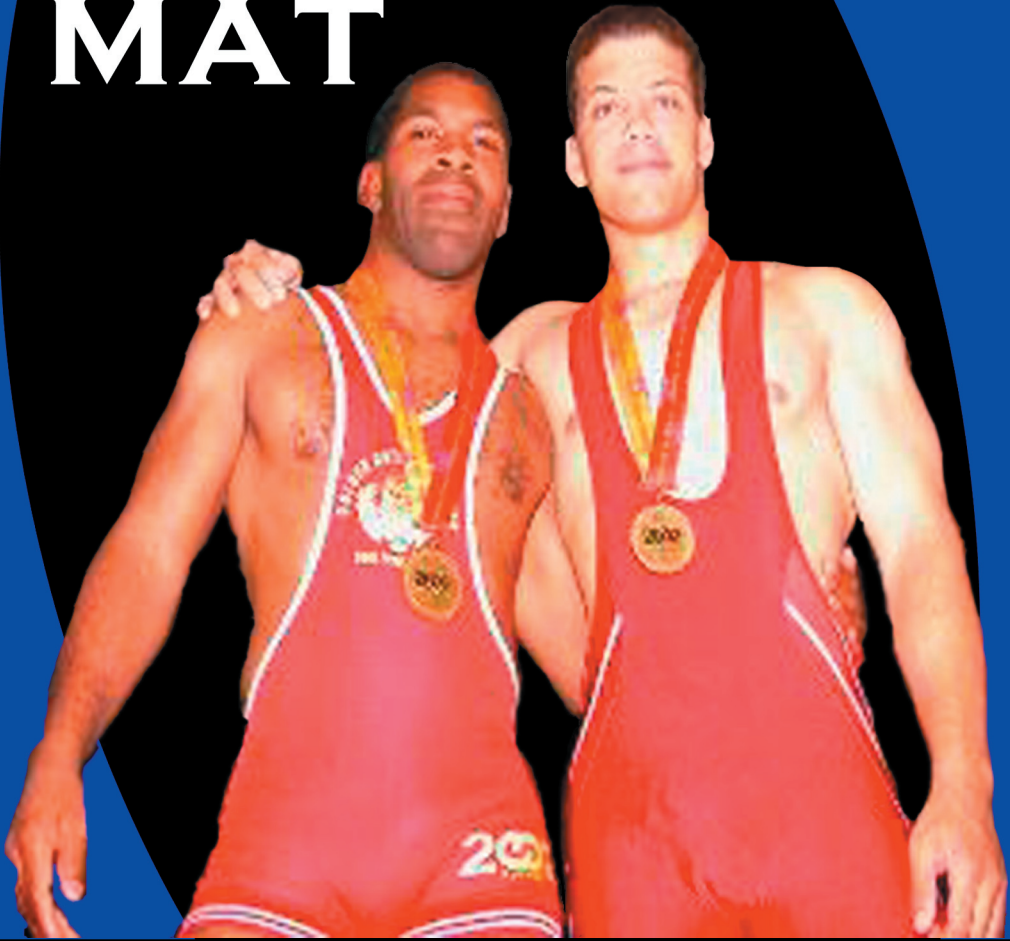


Chicago 2006

PRIDE ON THE MAT



**A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK
AT WRESTLING AND THE GAY GAMES**

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“BACK IN THE DAY...”

Movement grew underground

Before the Gay Games, long before the internet and email, gay and straight grapplers fed their hunger for matches on the dark fringes of urban life.

The most effective *modus operandi* for closeted gay wrestlers to meet was through secretive word-of-mouth referrals and mailing lists published by various pre-cyber clubs, such as the New York Wrestling Club, Gillespie’s List and New Orleans Wrestling Club. The forerunners of today’s cyber contact lists and web sites, they provided the same functions: communication and contact. Some of it was good, some of it was bad: you got in touch and took your chances.

Before Gay Games I, the “Challenge in ‘82” for wrestling had already been tackled by wrestling organizers from California. Most notable were Don Jung, coach of Golden Gate Wrestling (GGWC), and Pete Runyon of Southern California Wrestling (SCWC). The evolution from the seedy and dangerous closets of so many legitimate gay wrestlers, to the downright inspiring achievements of what became Gay Games I, had its roots back in the late 1970s in Southern California.

SCWC had emerged as the first legitimate club in the late ‘70s, flourishing under businessman Runyon and a



Wrestlers often met through magazine ads.

very talented, competent coach, Mike Rio, who was a part-time wrestling coach in Orange County, a Los Angeles Police Department officer, and a macho hunky Hollywood extra.

SCWC dominated Gay Games I and II. SCWC’s efforts were enhanced in 1981 when Tom Waddell asked Jung to create a legitimate

freestyle club in San Francisco, separate from the more playful and unstructured San Francisco Wrestling Club. This became the GGWC, and both clubs scheduled many inter-club competitions every year.

***“Inter fæces et
urinam nascimur”***

– St. Augustine

Jung was already well known and respected in California. A state champ at both Vallejo High

School and Chabot Junior College, he became the coach at Mission High School in San Francisco. He and his good friend and fellow coach at Riordan High School, Steve Swanson, built the GGWC in time for Gay Games I, and enlisted the proactive support of many California coaches and officials.

The YMCA teams in New York and other cities also were fertile ground for meeting other wrestlers. Bars featured wrestling events in which the winners were given cash prizes. Eventually a very loose underground of legitimate wrestlers formed and endured.



1982 built mainstream ties

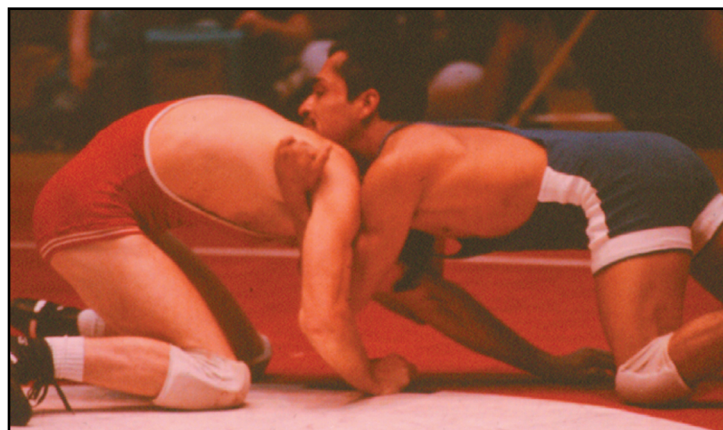
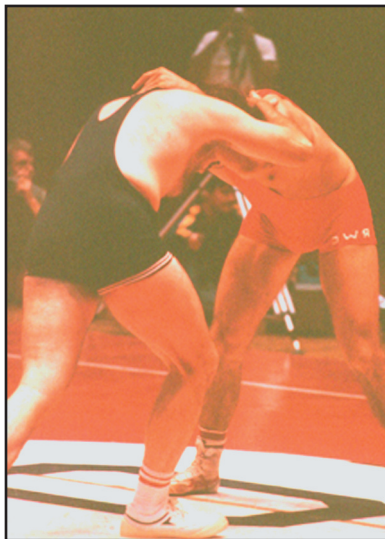
The 1982 Gay Games wrestling tournament secured the much coveted California USA Wrestling (CA-USAW) sanctioning as a legitimate competition without much fanfare. In fact, wrestling is the only sport to have received official sanctioning for every Gay Games.

The sanctioning brought medical and liability coverage as well as experienced, competent officials. But it implied a connection to the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), which 19 days before the Opening Ceremonies had won a court injunction yanking the word "Olympic" from the original title of "Gay Olympic Games."

Top officials were enlisted, most notably Andy Foley, high school coach of one of the current Gay Games wrestlers, Calvin Malone. Robin Chambers was a well known and respected NorCal wrestling tournament pairing official who proved to be a phenomenal asset.

An inspiring opening address was delivered by Alan Abraham, former coach at New York's Columbia University, Athletic Director at the time of San Francisco State, and currently Dean of Students at SFSU.

Drawing a parallel with the anti-Semitic prejudice he had endured at the New York Athletic Club decades earlier to the challenges of acceptance facing the gay wrestlers of 1982, he not only instilled a sense of pride, but issued a challenge to the wrestlers to stay involved for change. The speech moved the audience to tears as the wrestlers realized they were about to make history.



Top photo: Steve Swanson of San Francisco (in red) wrestles at 180 lbs. An English teacher and coach at Riordan High School, he died in 1989.

Left photo: Peter Gomez of San Francisco (in blue) at 136.5 lbs. blocks Larry Blakeley, who moved from Tennessee to Los Angeles after the Games. Both were dead by 1992.



Clubs emerge as AIDS strikes

The success of the wrestling tournament in Gay Games I created a wave of energy and change throughout the underground wrestling culture.

The hunger to continue the personal and athletic contacts made at the first Gay Games led to the emergence of legitimate wrestling clubs in other cities before Gay Games II. The New York Knights, the Boston Stranglers and the Philadelphia Spartans were just three of the many new clubs that sprang up modeled after Southern California and Golden Gate.

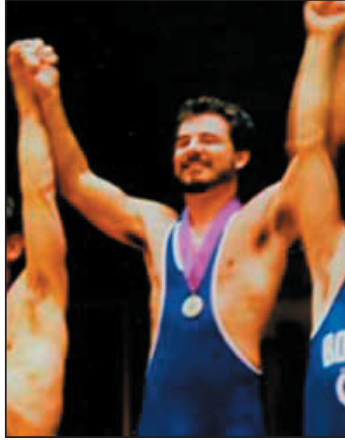
While the gay freestyle wrestling community was organizing, university folkstyle programs were being dropped by hundreds of schools under Title IX. Straight wrestlers displaced by the Title IX cuts often found their way to the new "gay" clubs, which then were able to draw enough participation for regular practices. The close personal day-to-day contacts that developed destroyed stereotypes. Wrestling's institutional homophobic fears, fed by ignorance, were dealt a mortal blow.

Roughly 15 percent of the wrestlers registered for the current 2006 Gay Games in Chicago are heterosexual. Every Gay Games has had 10 to 20 percent heterosexual participation. Gay Games wrestling has always been about accep-

— tance, not sexuality.

A sense of pride and camaraderie manifested itself in a lot of very definitive cult/club-coded T-shirts. Gay wrestlers used these to identify each other when attending mainstream wrestling events such as the Olympic Trials or the NCAA championships.

But the euphoria was tragically short lived. In the gay-ghetto cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, AIDS was cutting a deadly swath through the ranks of the emerging sports leadership. Within a few years of Gay Games II, GGWC coach Don Jung, SCWC coach Mike Rio,



Scott Velliquette of Southern California Wrestling triumphed for gold in 1986.

Gay Games founder Tom Waddell and hundreds of other leaders across the gay sports world were dead.

Ignorance, fear and hopelessness became the hallmarks of once thriving clubs. Don Jung committed suicide the day after his Gay Games II matches. Mike Rio and Tom Waddell followed a few years later. Many of the straight wrestlers would no longer practice with the clubs. Even the clubs' participation and volunteer efforts in local tournaments were no longer sought or appreciated. The years from 1985 to 1989 were the darkest period as many gay wrestlers disappeared off the face of the earth virtually without a trace.



Founders set tone for future

The success and growth of gay wrestling today is the legacy of the hard work of heroes from the past.

Don Jung brought credibility to Gay Games wrestling, leveraging his mainstream reputation and skills as a competitor and coach to found Golden Gate Wrestling within the constructs of the Bay Area Wrestling Association and California-USA Wrestling. Jung brought on board many other very influential people who signed on to our credibility as early as 1982. One of them was Alan Abraham San Francisco State; another was Steve Swanson.

Swanson was an Archbishop Riordan High School wrestling coach and teacher in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After his death, the high school honored him by naming its wrestling facility after him.

Pete Runyon's financial management of the first gay club in the late '70s, Southern California Wrestling Club (SCWC), was the prototype of economic resourcefulness. Their wrestlers carefully balanced the integrity of the sport with crowd appeal in order to have fun – and raise money.

Gary France's term as coach and president of GGWC (1988-1994) brought about the establishment of the GGWC CA-USAW charter and the institutionalized program within the San Francisco Parks & Recreation offerings. France's persistence with basketball's Tony Jasinski in finally earning the acceptance of gay sports at the Eureka Valley Rec Center in the Castro (now the Mark Bingham Gym), was a political milestone. That relationship survives today, and is the key to the success of SCWC, San Diego Bulldog Wrestling and GGWC.

Kathleen McAdams and Rochelle Robinson were both California women's freestyle wrestling champions who came out of the GGWC program to compete in Gay Games. The ultimate achievement was Rochelle's performance as an out lesbian at the USAW freestyle nationals in Orlando in 1998.

Three participants from Gay Games I competed at this year's Gay Games VII wrestling tournament: Bob Sayers, Gene Dermody and John Thayer.

The wrestling legacy continues to grow. Author Jim Provenzano's experience wrestling in the 1998 Gay Games inspired him to write the first coming-of-age wrestling novel, "PINS," adapted into a play and featured during the 2006 Gay Games.



Don Jung formed Golden Gate Wrestling Club in 1981 at the request of Gay Games founder Dr. Tom Waddell. After coaching the team through the first two Gay Games and medalling in both, complications with AIDS drove him to suicide before Gay Games II ended.



The Games go on the road

The Gay Games gained true international stature in 1990 in Vancouver, the first time they were held outside the United States under the newly re-formed Federation of Gay Games.

The turnout from California's decimated and demoralized wrestling clubs was its lowest participation ever in terms of percentage of entrants. But New York and Philadelphia emerged as the new powerhouses, with substantial increases in Canadian, Australian and European wrestlers.

Even with AIDS taking its toll, the event saw a strong renewal of interest in banding the various wrestling clubs together in order to exert influence on the running of the Gay Games wrestling tournament. Wrestlers who had been to previous Gay Games were so disappointed by the organization of the wrestling event at Gay Games III that an informal meeting of club leaders immediately after the tournament resulted in the formation of the International Wrestlers Alliance (IWA). It had support from seven clubs (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tampa, Phoenix, New York, Philadelphia and Houston) plus 7 individual representatives from

Sydney, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, London, Frankfurt and Amsterdam.

In 1992 IWA was incorporated as a 501c4 California non-profit organization, but its application to join the FGG did

not meet Federation requirements. Instead, Golden Gate was granted a position as a temporary stand-in until IWA could meet the rigorous standards. In 1995, IWA changed its name to Wrestlers WithOut Borders (WWB) because of a brand name conflict with a professional wrestling group. In 1997 GGWC



The Vancouver games triggered changes in wrestling that led to the formation of WWB.

officially transferred its organizational directorship in the FGG to WWB.

From 1992 to 1996 a resurgence of gay clubs occurred in several cities. New York actually had three thriving co-existing clubs for many years: the Knights, Metro and Twin Towers. Several factors were responsible, including a better understanding and management of the AIDS crisis, the emergence of the internet and email as a primary mode of communication, and a change in the GLBT community culture that was moving away from a preoccupation with bars and baths towards other more mainstream activities such as sports.



Women earn spotlight in '94

The wrestling tournament for Gay Games IV in New York reached numerous and momentous historic high notes.

After New York was selected as the host city, a strong contingent of local women successfully pushed for inclusion of women's wrestling. Gay Games IV became the first time women's wrestling was offered, 10 years before the Summer Olympic Games followed suit with the 2004 Games. It proved to be the most celebrated event of the Gay Games.

"An athlete all my life, I have to say that wrestling in Gay Games IV was one of the all-time highlights," said 1994 medalist Cathy Seabaugh. "Competing against women from Holland, feeling the energy and excitement of a packed house at the venue, ultimately reaching the finals in my weight class, it was a day I'll always cherish.

Another major breakthrough was the full cooperation of a major university and its wrestling staff to put on the event. New York University's execution of the Gay Games IV wrestling became the standard for future Gay Games. Buoyed by the women's registrations, the total number of wrestlers hit 160: a number never matched since.

"Growing up in southeast Missouri watching our high school wrestlers win their way toward a state championship, I always admired the sport," Seabaugh said. "I imagined myself out on the mat,



Women's wrestling debuted in Gay Games IV, a decade before the 2004 Summer Olympics.

grappling with women my age and size to test myself. I wondered how aware I was of my balance, my ability to strategize how to pin an opponent who might have longer arms and legs. I wished I would have a chance to wrestle in a recognized competitive setting.

"I got to college and finally had a chance to compete in a contact sport – rugby. It was an amazing training ground for my wrestling competition in 1994 at the Gay Games in New York. When I arrived in New York, I never had wrestled a woman in an official match. It was an exhilarating experience in so many ways."



Wrestlers prove their class

When the Gay Games made it to Europe for the first time, no one knew what to expect.

Not the spectators at the University of Amsterdam, not the competitors on the mats, not the representatives from the Netherlands Wrestling Federation.

Confusion about rules, scoring and pairing, coupled with an impromptu decision to shorten the day and cancel matches just to get out earlier, caused angst among the wrestlers.

The wrestlers responded with their usual aplomb.

At the end of the day, the frustration of the wrestlers boiled over into symbolic gestures of defiance. The emotional high point of the tournament was a direct result of this defiance.

In the awarding of the gold and silver medals in the men's open 76 kg, the gold was incorrectly awarded to Robert Lebeau of San Francisco and the silver to Gary Bertonis of New York City. However, Bertonis had decisively beaten Robert in a head-to-head match up, and it was the cancellation of subsequent matches for Gary that caused the points inequity. After the medals had been awarded on the platforms, Lebeau and Bertonis climbed down from the plat-

form, switched medals, and re-mounted the platforms much to the chagrin of the officials. The applause of the wrestlers was thunderous. In three other similar cases, medal awards had to be adjusted in order to defuse the "sit in" defiance of wrestlers in front of the officials table.

The emergence of Amsterdam's

Tigertje Wrestlers as a powerhouse was another positive for the event. Tigertje's post tournament party featured consolation matches and a surprise visit from one of the Netherlands Wrestling Federation officials, who came to offer his belated congratulations and appreciation. He admitted he was impressed, and that the NWF had not given Gay Games Wrestling the credit it deserved. He then proceeded to wrestle Greco with some of the wrestlers.

There were many German, French, and English wrestlers in

the stands who had not registered to wrestle for whatever reason. Many were unaware of the event, many underestimated their abilities, and many did not believe that the event would be legitimate. That would change. Some 30 wrestlers met informally with WWB delegates to remedy the problems and plan the Sydney 2002 event.



When Robert LeBeau was awarded the gold medal, he passed it on to New York's Gary Bertonis, who had beaten him head on.



Novice day highlights Sydney

Sydney's tournament in 2002 was greatly enhanced by the early and enthusiastic involvement of the local wrestling community and the legacy left by the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.

Larry Papadopoulos and his wife, Aly, owners of the "Boxing Works" on Castlereigh,

let the wrestlers work out and weigh themselves all week. They also hosted the wrestlers' party, and processed a lot of the tournament paperwork.

New South Wales Wrestling's (NSWW) support was crucial, especially that of Don Brown and the mat officials.

A new addition to the Gay Games program was a novice day for wrestlers new to the sport. It proved to be a great success.

Australian Olympian Leonard Zaslavsky's program for the novices inspired many of the elite and experienced wrestlers to pitch in and help out with the coaching. Many of the novices who wrestled in the exhibition tournament Sunday enjoyed it



Russian connection: Sydney officials Maya Feigleman (Sydney), Alex Ostrovskiy (San Francisco) and Sam Feigleman (Sydney). Alex and Sam were teammates on the 1956 Soviet national team.



Tournament organizers: Kurt Brinschwitz, Peter Verey, who had worked on the Sydney Olympics, and Gene Dermody

so much they entered the regular tournament the next day.

The novice program added an element of camaraderie and fun to the event that settled the wrestlers' nerves heading into the Monday tournament.

Sydney Coach Brendan O'Shea, organizer Barry Webb, and the other wrestlers of the Harbor City WC (HCWC) – Andy Quan, Gilbert Gundersen, and Neil Bowyer – were gracious hosts and tough wrestlers.



Grappling hooks

The biological appeal of wrestling

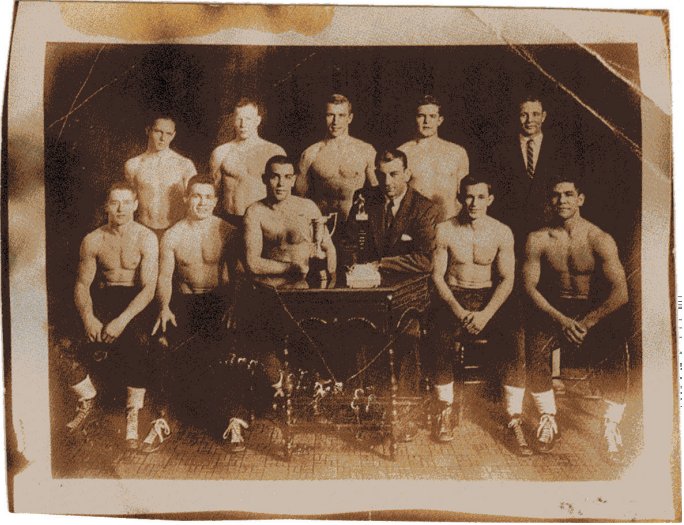
Many sports lay claim to being the oldest of all. Only wrestling has the written record to support its case.

In the opening of the most ancient recorded epic ever discovered, the Sumerian legend of "Gilgamesh," a young and irresponsible king finds his life transformed when he wrestles a giant from the forest, a beast of a man named Enkidu.

In a dramatic bout in the muddy streets, Enkidu is suddenly beaten. Out of the match in the muck a remarkable, somewhat homoerotic bond is formed. The two go on to conquer the world as far as they can stride and challenge the very gods. After Gilgamesh passes through profound grief on the death of his dearest friend, he becomes a truly great king, worthy of the enduring epic dedicated to his life.

What gives wrestling such eternal appeal? What earns it the enduring loyalty of so many of its converts? The answers to those questions can be found in the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, literature's greatest grapplers.

Wrestling harnesses aggression appropriately and effectively. Wrestling creates transcendent bonds of camaraderie.



Wrestling has a rich tradition of building powerful bonds, whether on a university team (above), a sports club, or individuals pairing up on their own.

derie. Wrestlers gain the confidence to extend their ambitions and the skills to succeed when they do so. And the prolonged close physical contact provides a non-sexual release while stimulating powerful hormones.

Sexuality and wrestling

Despite the social strides of the past two decades, the mainstream wrestling establishment often is perceived as hostile to gays. Non-wrestlers often project their own erotic fantasies onto the sport. But by creating coaching and competition opportunities, gay friendly clubs have disproved that sexuality plays a central role in what happens on the mat.

As Golden Gate's Gene Dermody

THE ALLURE OF WRESTLING



told author Dan Woog in the groundbreaking book *Jocks*, "It's so intimidating as a 12- or 13-year-old to walk into a wrestling room in the first place, with all those sweaty people rolling around. If you're gay or think you might be, it can be almost impossible.

"We've got guys who had drug and alcohol problems and sex addictions.

Now they're wrestling, and maybe for the first time in their lives, they feel good about themselves. It's about dedication, commitment, and competition, not about who looks best or who can get

whom. All that sexual stuff is unimportant. But this – wrestling – is real. We're not a sex club or a self-help group. We allow gay men to relate to each other on a nonsexual level. A lot of gay men have trouble relating in nonsexual ways. Wrestling lets you do that."

Transcendent bonds

Veteran wrestlers tend to talk about the grapplers they have met and the relationships formed on the mat and beyond more than the bouts themselves.



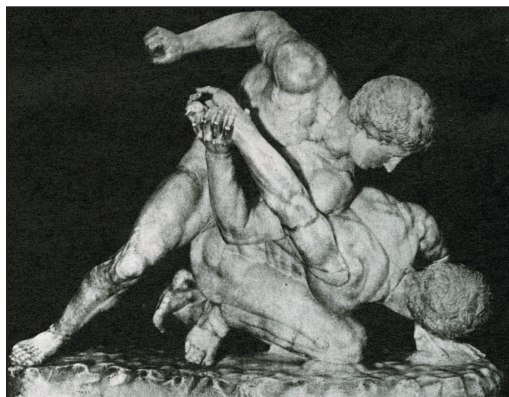
"To me, wrestling means a great experience, working out, comradeship, new friends and a close bond to other wrestlers," said Southern California Wrestling Club's Pete Runyon. "Finding men with a mutual interest in wrestling has proven a great satisfaction.

"I joined three active clubs when I came out: wrestling, skiing and biking. In each case I made new friends and added to my life experience.

"Skiing and motorcycling bring guys close together and allow for trips and active fellowship. Wrestling brings you closer together but also challenges you more than most sports. A lot depends on your aggressiveness, desire to win and physical fitness. The Southern California Wrestling Club was a great experience for me. My previous club had been the Pasadena Junior Chamber which gave me training in business and event planning. But my favorite activity was wrestling. I guess it satisfied physical and mental urges."

Appropriate aggression

Gilgamesh may have been the first wrestler to emerge as a world leader, but certainly not the last. Epics and history are filled with grapplers who led by force of intellect, muscle and will. From Greek mythology there was the mighty warrior Ajax. From antiquity there was the world conqueror Alexander the Great. In modern times there was President Abraham Lincoln, who led the United States through a bloody



Wrestling: force, form and function.

Continued on back ➤

THE ALLURE OF WRESTLING

Continued from inside

civil war into a stronger unified existence.

Plato considered wrestling the most civilized of combat sports because the goal is conquest through control, not defeat through destruction.

“Wrestling allows a woman to step into a world we’ve been locked out of for centuries,” said Gay Games IV grappler Cathy Seabaugh. “To feel the grip of another woman’s hand around your arm or leg, to battle against her body as she’s trying to drive your shoulders to the mat, all in a sport atmosphere, is exciting and gratifying. Wrestling, like rugby, allows us to test our physical limits in a way sports traditionally associated with females do not. I recommend every woman try it.”



Said Runyon, “When you see guys on the mat who are in an impossible situation and all of a sudden they break free – then you know they have the driving spirit that is so important in life.”

Perhaps the most egalitarian of all sports, it favors no single body type. Short, tall, fat, old, young, muscular, deaf, blind, slow, fast, amputee: each has inherent advantages if the wrestler has the discipline to master technique. Its diversity and egalitarianism are built into the rules. The resulting cultural camaraderie is the core of the Gay Games values.

Participation and Inclusion

In the mainstream world, wrestling is a young person’s sport. In the wrestling fostered through the “gay clubs,” coaching is geared to those who enter the sport regardless of age or medical status, keeping the door open for many wrestlers to extend their careers. For Chicago, the Gay Games for the first time offered a veterans (50 years and older) age division, which drew nearly 10 percent of the registrations.

Oldest in the field was Noel Baggett, 65, of Golden Gate. One of his coaches, Roger Brigham, 52, returned to wrestling after 28 years. In 2004, Brigham became the first person to wrestle in a USA Wrestling freestyle event on artificial hips.

“This wouldn’t have been possible if there weren’t gay clubs focused strictly on adult wrestling,” Brigham said. “I came out as a wrestling coach in Alaska in 1982, but I always played my sports with mainstream straight clubs. I joined a gay team after my surgery because it was the only place I could find the coaches and the athletes with the willing attitude to help me figure out how to make adjustments.”

At 76, Runyon isn’t wrestling any more. But the sport left its mark on him just as much as he left his on the sport.

“You don’t know how much I miss wrestling. When you remember the matches you have had – private or public – you can’t fail but have a sense of pride, satisfaction, joy and fulfillment.”

