Golden Aspirations

Jacqui Becker

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2001/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Iowa State wrestling phenom Cael Sanderson has a dream. It’s a dream that he has trained for, sweated for, worked for, and won’t give up until he achieves. His dream is bigger than his two-year, 79-0 winning streak or the NCAA National Championships he won as a freshman and sophomore at Iowa State. His goal to be the best in the world will not be denied. For now, though, the dream of Olympic gold will have to wait — because Cael failed to make the United States Olympic freestyle wrestling team.

The dream that began in his hometown of Heber City, Utah, is far from over. Despite a disappointing qualifying run, the Cyclone grappler is preparing for his shot at the 2004 Olympics. “The ultimate in wrestling is to win an Olympic gold medal,” Cael says. “It’ll be real hard to retire without winning one. That’s basically my goal, and I’m not going to settle for anything but the gold. I just have to postpone it for a little while. I can try out for the Olympics as long as I can walk, but I only have four years to wrestle in college.”

Cael, senior in art and design, traveled to New Orleans, La., last spring as part of his quest to compete in Sydney, Australia. He secured a spot at the freestyle wrestling qualifying event in Dallas, Texas, by besting five other competitors and taking an overall win. Cael wrestled in the 187.25 to 213 pound weight class and saw this as another opportunity. “I thought I had a good chance. I had as good of a shot as anyone else for the team and I couldn’t really not try out,” he says.

Even with three years of college wrestling (including a red-shirt year), Sanderson had to shift gears and change styles because Olympic style wrestling differs from college. Cael, his father Steve, and ISU assistant coach Chris Bono says this went against his chances of making the team. “On my feet I didn’t need much, but on the mat was the difference,” Sanderson says. “It takes some time and a lot of work to make those adjustments from collegiate to freestyle wrestling.”

Each was aware of Cael’s weakness and knew the three-month transition would be a difficult one to make. “I knew if he was going to get beat, it was on the mat. On his feet, he’s five or six points better than everyone,” Bono says.

Cael won his first match in Dallas, but lost in the semi-finals to Mike Van Arsdale, an ISU alum. “I made some real quick little mental
errors that cost me some points," Cael says. "I actually dominated the whole match, but he scored a lot of points off of one move." This is where Cael's dream was put on hold.

"To think that I could have been on [the Olympic team] - it's hard for me to believe right now. Then on the other hand, when I think that I lost and didn't make it, it's real hard. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't kick myself for not being on the team this year."

Instead of stewing over his defeat, Cael plans to improve his techniques by getting some international wrestling experience in Japan Oct. 31 with other wrestlers who failed to qualify for the Olympic team. "You have to get there and pay your dues, just like with anything else in life," he says.

"It is always good to get international experience," he adds. "Every freestyle match will help me.Basically, it is making me pick up my training. I'm not just hanging out. I'm really having to focus and work at it."

Debbie Sanderson, Cael's mother, says her third child is handling his disappointment well. "I'm not sure if it was life or death for Cael this year. He's looking to 2004. He's at the right age with two good Olympic years coming up," she says.

"He's coming out at a perfect time. He'll be out of school for two years. He'll learn enough that he'll get better where he can wrestle with anyone in the world on the mat and do a good job," Bono adds. Bono trained with Cael at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., this past spring and sees Cael's potential. "I've got a good feeling he'll be right there with me, and I'm hoping he'll be my roommate on that trip [to the Olympics]," Bono says.

Bono believes Cael possesses all the necessary tools it takes to be a champion. "He has a competitive nature, a work ethic, and a second to none will to win," he says. "You can't instill that in someone; that has to come from within. With all three of those things, you're going to be a champion."

Cael's dream of Olympic gold started early. He and his brothers, Cody and Cole, began to follow their father to countless wrestling matches when he was a coach for Wasatch High School in Heber City. "One day they asked if they could do it, and it took off from there," Steve says. "All the boys got involved, and it turned into a family affair."

In Heber City, where people devoutly follow wrestling, the Sanderson boys led their high school to seven straight state championships while grappling for the program. Cael compiled a 127-3 record during his high school career and brought home four individual Utah state championships. He was also named Amateur Wrestling News' 1997 top prep at 171 pounds.

Bono remembers visiting Cael's high school and seeing him evolve into a stronger wrestler. "We were all waiting for him to lose. We'd beat on Cael when we would do camps there, and his senior year he got a little tougher."

Iowa State's wrestling dynasty was the next step in Cael's career. He would follow Cody and Cole to the program. "I've just looked up to my brothers in everything," he says. "Not only in wrestling, but just life in general. They've kept me on track and moving forward."

"Everyone is always pushing for each other and are there for each other. No matter if you win or lose, family is going to love you just the same."

Cael's red-shirt year brought something he isn't accustomed to — a pre-season loss. That defeat only fueled his fire and pushed him into high gear. "Things are totally different when you're a red shirt. I was in a higher weight class than the week before. After the loss, I knew I had to get a lot more intense and get stronger just to be able to compete," Cael recalls.

"All of a sudden, he turned it on," Bono says. "He started training, started getting better, and getting stronger. Things started snowballing. He tries to kill people. He wrestles as hard as he can for seven minutes and usually is 10 to 12 points better than anyone else he wrestles."

"I dominate more than most people have been able to as a freshman and a sophomore," Cael adds. "My philosophy in wrestling is to go out and score as many points as I can. I don't like close matches."

Cael's constant belief in himself and desire to win doesn't fade following any matchup. "The pressure is never really off. I think about wrestling, but not enough that it wears on me. That might be part of the reason I've done as well as I have. I don't worry so much that I stress myself out," he says. "Whenever I get done, I'm always thinking about wrestling and who I'm going to beat next. And how much harder I'm going to have to work next year to keep improving."

As a freshman, Cael's hand was held high in victory when he became a 184-pound NCAA National Champion. the first freshman in the history of Iowa State wrestling to win an NCAA championship.

He recalls looking toward the stands to see his father's eyes. "I was watching for him. I'd pretty much won in the third period, and I was just trying to make eye contact. It's been a long journey with a lot of ups and downs," Cael says.

Steve remembers his son looking around the crowd and pointing at him with a big smile. "That smile was worth a million bucks, and I've got it on tape from ESPN to watch over and over again."

"My sons don't expect to win all the time, but they expect to do their best," Debbie says.

"It has helped them develop the character they have."

Steve is pleased his sons chose the sport of wrestling because he believes in the responsibility and self-discipline it teaches. "It is an individual game where you can't rely on anyone else. It is your own effort that's going to bring you through," he says.

After his collegiate career, Cael hopes to stay at ISU as an assistant coach and continue his training while working out with the team. "That'll allow me to train for the 2004 Olympics and also develop my drawing skills and see what I can get going in that area," he says.

Cael's family is supporting him all the way, and his little brother Cyler, an eighth-grader, says he's already saving his money so he can see his brother in red, white, and blue.

"I love having three kids on the Iowa State team, but maybe we'll have three kids on the Olympic team," he says.

Jacqui Becker is a sophomore in journalism. She worked at the Atlantic News Telegraph this summer and has worked for both Ethos and the Daily for the past two years. She's a slave to her craft and never leaves the office.

---

**Cael Sanderson's Journey to the Olympics Was Put on Hold, But ISU's Star Wrestler Isn't Giving Up**

---