

The Greatest Dual Meet Ever!

By Royce Alger



I am often asked what was the greatest wrestling event I have ever participated in. There are many that come to mind. The obvious, the NCAA's, the US Open, the world championships. Pretty tough decision? Not really. The answer is...none of the above! The greatest wrestling event I have ever participated in was...an impromptu wrestling duel with Iran. Let me set the stage and introduce the players...

The year was 1995. The country was Russia. This was to be my first trip abroad with the Brands boys. I have often lamented about making a

big trip with those two. You see, in 1988 I was a fifth-year senior at the University of Iowa. I'll never forget the time Dan Gable told me we were going after a set of twins from Northwest Iowa. I was to help a little with the recruiting of them. You see, when a man has a great year at Iowa, Gable will make sure incoming recruits get to meet the big name guys. These two guys were from a small, blue collar town called Sheldon. It was often said that Sheldon, Iowa was a town where the population never changed. A town of hard-working people and tough character. You had to be tough just to survive the winters! Well anyway, those guys were raw power and energy and probably as green as any two boys that had ever come down the pipe. Gable often

recruited character and put a lot of stock in parents. I still thoroughly enjoy the little time I got to spend with Tom Brands, Sr. He is probably one of my favorite parents of all my old teammates. He is very candid and holds nothing back. A trait that behooves the Brands brothers entirely. I often joke with Tom and Terry that it was a good thing Tom Sr. and I were not teenagers together. We would probably have gotten into a lot of trouble. Kind of like a Thelma and Louise throw back! It is probably why I am so close to the Brands. We share similar upbringing and parental guidance. Our fathers were very tough on us and would never settle for excuses or the easy road. Make your own bed and sleep in it. Back to the trip...

We arrived in Siberia at 3:00 a.m. All of us over weight and pretty owly. Ready to fight! I can still remember the brothers complaining to me about the long bus rides to and from our workouts and different team destinations. I had always told them that trips to Russia were enjoyable. They were holding me accountable. The tournament was stacked and there would be no easy matches. The Yaregan tourney was the top tourney in the coun-



2002 USA Wrestling World Team Trials Championships. Freestyle 145.5 lb. Jamill Kelly, Gator Club, vs. Chris Bono, Sunkist. Photo by John C. Johnson.

try. A weight class consisted of about 30 Russians and three or four foreign teams. China, Japan, USA, and Iran were the expected invites. That meant multiple Russian matches in a row. In the Olympics you might draw an Australian, Canadian or multiple other non-world beaters. We would be afforded no such luxury. As everyone knows, there are always four or five Russian wrestlers at a given weight that could win the world championships. Just my luck, I pulled the champion first round. I was one of those guys that needed a warm-up match in a tourney. Gable would often make me wrestle a hard match with one of our alternates before a big tourney. I needed to get everything moving through me. Tom and Terry were similar. I have often seen them come back from four or five point deficits in the early rounds of a tourney. As fate would have it, they both made it to the finals and I had to wait for my Russian to make the finals before I was afforded to tackle the task of wrestling back for 3rd. I wrestled five Russians in a row and salvaged a bronze medal. Not what I wanted, but a 5-1 record for the competition. Tom won a hard match in the finals and Terry battled to a 10-9 loss. He fell behind 8-0 in the first minute of the match. I often said those guys were like semi trucks. It took a while to get all their power going. After the meet, we attended the Russian post-tourney party. Formal meal and big band music. Lots of dancing and male bonding. Sometimes those Russians would party till 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. To say the least, I was spent having gone up on the stage and singing multiple Doo-op songs from the 50's. As any teammate will tell you, I am not afraid to get up on stage.

After the tourney we were to travel five time zones back to Moscow. We were to have a team practice consisting of stretching, trouble-shooting, and heavy sauna. The facility was on the 20th floor at a downtown building. It was very meek and primitive, as are a lot of Russian wrestling rooms. Kind of like Rocky's old gym in the movie "Rocky". We were just about done with our light workout, when the cabbage hit the fan. The Iranians showed up and looked angry. You see, they had missed the tourney due to blizzard conditions. They were stuck in Moscow for the past four days. All dressed up and nowhere to go! Their head coach was talking to our interpreter and intensely arguing about something. They wanted to wrestle a dual meet. Our coach pulled us aside and explained their request. He made it clear it wasn't mandatory, but thought it would be a good experience. This was no easy offer. It wasn't a bunch of French athletes who wanted to roll. They were full-blown

Iranian men and they wanted to fight. Five guys said yes! Terry Brands, Dan St. John, Tom Erickson, Jon Guira, and yours truly. There was no weigh-in and I, quite frankly, think they lied about their respective weights. The guy I squared off with looked 20 pounds heavier. I didn't want to look like a wussy. Let's roll! The coaches were to referee the matches. One from each side. The time was to be kept by the Iranian manager. We might as well have used the sun as a time piece. I know that one match went over 15 minutes. We started out with myself. I won a 3-2 squeaker, with a breaking take-down at the 10-minute mark. It was basically a civilized fist fight. The mat boundaries bordered one of the walls. The wall was free game! I can remember St. John getting taken down after his opponent pulled him "OFF" the wall for the winning score. The final match was Terry Brands at 125.5 lbs. I can't really say if it was the most vicious thing I have ever seen, but I have witnessed cage fights that were less violent. The match was knotted at 2-2 at the eight-minute mark. The next point would be the win. There was closed fist punches, head butting, and a litany of four letter expressions by *both* parties. Even

a heated argument between the referees. At the fourteen-minute mark, I witnessed the greatest flurry I have ever seen. Terry Brands dug out the last point. He literally pulled the man off the cement. The boundaries were clearly not a part of the match. One time Terry had to drag the guy away from a bench he was holding onto. It was truly remarkable. We had won the meet! It not only goes down as the greatest wrestling meet I have ever seen or participated in, it was the greatest sporting event I have ever seen. It was true competition. I couldn't help but think how our sport could multiply into a huge spectator sport if there were more matches like this. Time has not dissipated the intensity of this event. It has motivated me as an athlete and a coach. There was no media, no awards or fan fare. Just two countries colliding in the worst possible conditions. In retrospect, I will say I am most proud of my participation in this arcane event. It defined the true reason why I compete. To win at all costs, any place, any time. I am Royce Alger and I am most assuredly out of here! 🇺🇸

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