

## Technique and Training

By Mitch Clark & Scott Conroe

**Y**ou're known in the wrestling community as a pinner. Is that a frame of mind or something technical you learned?

I just honestly wanted to get the match over with. I thought maybe I didn't want to go six minutes, and this was the easiest way to get off the mat and score a lot of points for my team. When I get the guy near his back, I think, "This is my golden opportunity, don't let this one go, just don't let him off his back." Once he's there, I would wrap him up as if I were a python.

*When do you think young wrestlers should think about using legs?*

I learned about legs primarily in college, though I did use legs in high school but didn't score with them most of the time. I think any time a wrestler starts to go in the weight room and do squats and lunges, build up their hips and legs, it's time to learn. But learn how to ride and break guys down first. Then, as soon as the fundamentals on top are learned, get right into legs.

*Coaches sometimes shy away from encouraging kids to use legs too early because they end up just clinging to their opponent and not being a pinner. What do you think?*

I agree they have to learn the proper technique early. If they learn cross-body rides, they're going to be a rider. And they'll revert back to their roots, to what they learned as peewees, to throw in the legs and do an offensive leg turn. Then they'll be plenty apt to throw in legs later in their career.

*A lot of times, because of takedowns, you got behind in matches. Does that bother you?*

Not at all. At one point, that was my offense: if someone took me down, I reversed him. Then people started taking me down and letting me up. In fact, most of the time, guys took me down first, and then I'd get a quick reversal or just come back and get the next point. Whatever I do in the first period. I can make up for by taking top. I hardly ever panicked.

*If you were down four points, would that bother you?*

No. I knew I could score points in 30 seconds if I put my mind to it. I would never panic. As to my coaches, I'd always look in the corner and they knew what I was doing. I always thought, "Even if he takes me down three more times, I can always take top and pin him."

*Do you always take top? When don't you?*

I don't if it's a real close match, and I know the guy, and every point matters. He could stall and have me not turn him, and I need that one point. Then, I'll pick down. If I'm losing by a lot, I'll take top. If I'm winning by a lot, I'll take top, because I know I can ride him. Or, I'll take top if I think I can turn him pretty easily. So, 70 percent of the time, I take top.

*What do you think about before a match? Is there a physical and mental warmup?*

Basically, I try to simulate a match. When I go out and wrestle, I don't want it to be a shock. I want my body primed so that it's conditioned to wrestle. If I don't warm up, it'll tire me out a lot quicker in the match because my muscles won't be ready. It'll just be too much of a surprise.

*How do you prepare yourself physically? Mentally?*

With a lot of tournaments, half an hour before a match you feel your heart pounding through your chest. You start shaking. That's when you have to control your heart rate. It means your body is working hard and you'll tire yourself out. You have to bring your heart rate down. Mentally, I like to play games with myself. I'll say, "C'mon, in the scheme of things, this isn't a big deal."

*Your father once asked you about getting "up" for matches. You just kind of looked at him.*

He asked, "Why aren't you going to get warmed up and get pumped up?" He said some guys slap each other, that kind of thing. I wasn't into it. I told him, "I know what I have to do when I go out there." It's different for everyone. I'm not the kind of guy who jumps around and goes nuts. But there are some people who do it and need to do it.



Michigan's 189 lb. Matt Erb, Thornapple, Kerlog, decisioned Ryan Zemmer, Lapeer West, 16-0. Photo by Gail Ranger.

**Was weight training a big part of your life?**

Yes, but outside the season. The incredible strength I developed from training with weights made a significant impact on my wrestling career. First, it gave me confidence and second the power to finish my moves. In high school, I was told not to lift during the season, and I didn't. You can lose 30 percent of your muscle during wrestling season, between not lifting, and cutting weight. But if you're in the weight room two to three times a week during the season, you'll only lose a little muscle, about five percent. And that would make a huge difference in the third period, you'll be that much stronger.

**What part of your body do you work on?**

I tend to isolate a body part and just go with it, try to fatigue it as much as possible. One of the things I used to do, I moved into an apartment when I was a senior that had an old set of weights. They looked like they'd been there 10 years. I'd grab a weight and I'd do 25 dead lifts and then 25 shrugs. The next day, I'd feel like I tore something in my hamstrings. That soreness would make me feel good about what I'd done. I'd just say, I'm going to beat this muscle into oblivion. Choose a body part that isn't going to be strained in that day's practice. I'd say lift up until 36 hours before a match.

**What do you do after a really tough practice or weight lifting session?**

You've got to get food in your system within the hour, maybe 90 minutes. Any food, but you need carbohydrates and protein. A protein shake or another supplement drink is ideal for post-workout fueling.

**When do you begin preparing mentally for the end of the season?**

I'd say six weeks. But a lot of people train for the Big Ten tournament, for getting past it, so unfortunately sometimes you have to start eight weeks before the state or national tournament.

**Do you train differently at the end of the season?**

Russ Hellickson had us do "shark baits." A guy goes out there for nine minutes, and each minute a different guy goes in on him. It just breaks you down mentally, you just want to quit. You turn into a lunatic. You're being taken down by guys who couldn't score a takedown on you the whole season if they tried. If you've got pride, it's hard to swallow.

**Do you scout opponents?**

I ask my coach or teammates, did you ever see this guy wrestle, does he do anything I should know about? You should always scout opponents somewhat. I take into consideration the outstanding things they do, but that's it. I don't watch film of guys. Russ always said, "Just do what you do."

**Are summer wrestling camps and clinics important?**

I always thought if you got one move out of a clinic, one thing you could practice and use during the season, you got your money's worth.

*You had a serious elbow injury in high school, a sternum injury, and then, in college, a knee injury. All have a common denominator: they could have been operated on and weren't. Today, everyone seems quick to get an injury operated on. What do you think?*

I deal with injury better than a lot of people, so what I'm saying is biased. Some people's bodies don't heal as well from surgery. I think surgery should be a last-ditch solution, a last resort. In some cases, it's a must. But I found that in the time they said

I'd start to recover and think about rehab, I was usually already in rehab. It's not always good to go against medical opinion, but in my mind I was doing the right thing. I felt good about how the injury was going.

**How did your height help you and hurt you?**

It hurt me because I didn't have a lot of power or speed. But I always thought being tall was an advantage. In order to be a great wrestler, you have to be better than everybody else at the basics, and I didn't do as well at the basics. I was good at what I did. I went a different route and got good at what I did.

*Let's say you're a freshman in college, and you're not in the lineup. What do you tell the people back home, who remember you as a star?*

What I can't stand is when people aren't in the lineup and lie about it. Go back home and tell 'em you're not in the lineup. You're not going to fool anybody. Tell people the truth. No matter what kind of athlete you were in high school, the transition to college is tough, mostly from a confidence standpoint.

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you get more confident. If you're not in the lineup, you must wait your turn. Don't expect to not be successful, and if you crack the lineup, don't say, "I'm a freshman, I won't be a national champ until my junior or senior year." You can't wait for the future. You've got to believe you can do it now. Sometimes you do your best as a freshman you're new to the scene, you don't know who anybody is. In this case you have fun and enjoy being the under-dog.

*Say I'm a freshman on a college team, and I'm getting my butt kicked. What can I do?*

That it's a good sign. You want to be wrestling with guys in the room who are kicking your butt. If you have any will or desire, you'll get better. If you're not being challenged or beaten on by the older guys, you will not improve.

*Say I'm a freshman on a college team, and I have an even or losing record. What do I tell people?*

That it says something about your team's schedule. The schedule should be tough. The people who plan your season

have to clone what will happen at the end of the year, when you reach the conference and NCAA competition. When I got to the NCAA tournament, it was just another tournament, because I'd been to other big competitions. My teammate Jeff Bucher always said he wasn't afraid to wrestle anyone who wasn't from the Big Ten.

Competition is just another source of improvement. You've got to stress the end of the year as a goal. People remember you if you win the Big Ten, not if you beat the kid from Michigan in a dual meet. I lost in my final home dual meet to Jevon Herman of Illinois, but I beat him in the Big Ten finals two weeks later. My Big Ten title is what people remember.

*Most athletes have little quirks, routines they do before they compete. Do you?*

In high school, before a soccer game, three of us would sing "Amazing Grace." Real quietly, on the field. Another thing, Nick Nutter used to always snap (irritate) me because he'd say, "Mitch, you've got to eat this or you won't win your next match." He'd have ice cream with pepper, and maple syrup and cottage cheese, all mixed

together. I'd eat it, because he was so good at predicting how I'd do. I was afraid if I didn't eat it, I'd lose. He'd say, "Do this or you won't be an All-American." And I felt like I had to do whatever he said. I'd be done eating, and he'd want me to finish a piece of pizza. I'd feel like I had to, so I would. Now, during the last five minutes of a match, I take off one article of clothing per minute until I'm down to my singlet.

*How would you like people to remember you?*

Just that I tried to help the sport of wrestling out by being creative, scoring points, defying what others want to do to have spectators enjoy our sport. I can't tell you how many times people said, "Thank you for paying for my ticket," meaning they had fun watching me and through that they enjoyed the sport.

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