



Rulon Gardner

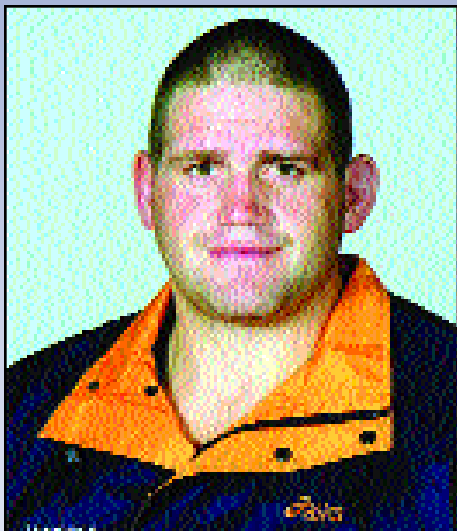
2001 WRESTLING MAN OF THE YEAR

By Kevan T. Kennington

Rulon Gardner was born of wonderful parents and he has eight older siblings. His parents, Reed and Virginia, taught their children by their own example. They worked hard and they were willing to sacrifice almost everything to see that their children were able to take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. Rulon's siblings had an important hand in his success. His sister Diana has always been one of his biggest fans. She has been at Rulon's side giving love and support throughout his career. When his mother was working as a nurse in Evanston, Diana and Marcella (sister) were busy at home feeding Rulon and his older brother Reynold. This was no easy task because they were one year apart and both heavyweights. The food bill must have been enormous.

Another person who entered his life, later on in his career, and has stuck by him through thick and thin is his lovely wife Stacy. Stacy has believed in Rulon and has supported him at every turn. As this writer's wife says, "Stacy is the wind beneath his wings".

As you have witnessed in the last



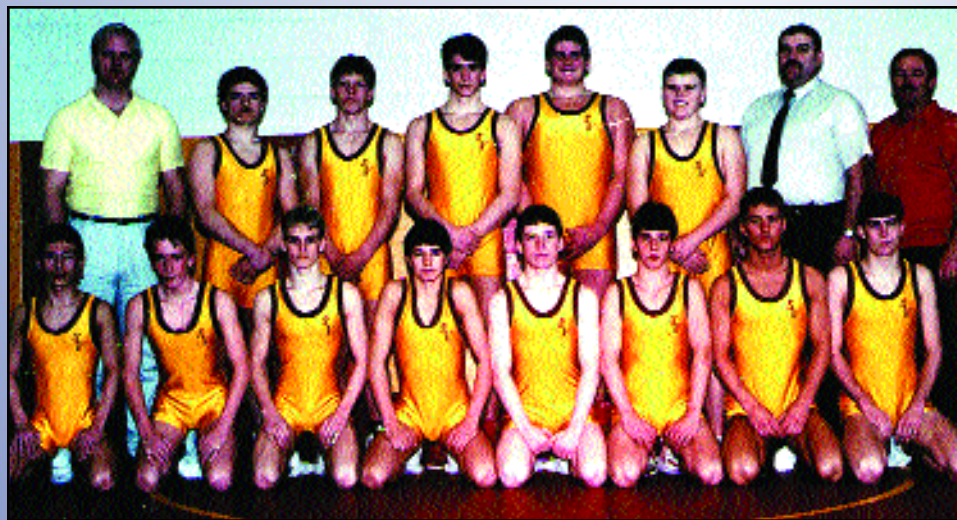
Olympics, Rulon is very appreciative of his family and others who have helped him. One of the reasons he has become an over night hero is his concern for others and his acknowledgment of their help. Rulon is concerned for others and this was displayed when he said, "I feel sorry for Karelin" and then acknowledged Karelin's greatness and said that he (Rulon) would never be able to accom-

plish what Karelin had. This has been so refreshing to the American people to see such a gracious, humble winner. To witness a person who is more concerned with others than himself is a trait that is sorely missing in America.

America has been able to identify so easily with Rulon because he acts, talks and thinks like an ordinary human being. You do not get the feeling that he thinks that he is better than you. He is willing to visit, sign autographs, and have pictures taken with his fans with a genuine caring attitude. His fans can feel that caring feeling.

Growing up Rulon learned one thing that has carried him throughout his life and that is how to work. All of his family have been hard workers. Getting up early to milk and feed the cows, then off to school, then off to practice, then back home to milk and feed the cows again was a normal day for Rulon. In between each of these activities, Rulon was always planning his next meals which were very important to him. Rulon had little time to waste on unimportant things. If an important opportunity did present itself, the whole family was willing to make the necessary sacrifices to make sure that Rulon (or other family members) took advantage of those opportunities.

The first time I remember watching Rulon wrestle was when he was in the 7th grade. He was almost as wide as he was tall and he did not have a lot of experience on the wrestling mat. Rulon did not participate in any wrestling except during the junior high and high school seasons. When he was young this inexperience kept him from being a real force. By the time he was a junior he was a force to be reckoned with.



Star Valley Wrestling Team 1989. Rulon is on the back row, fifth from the left.

However, there was one problem, Rulon's older brother Reynold was a senior and Rulon was unable to defeat him in the wrestle-offs. Therefore, Rulon was our Junior Varsity heavy-weight.

The wrestle off between Rulon and Reynold were real wars. I can not remember Rulon ever defeating his brother in a wrestle off. Rulon and Reynold's fame spread through the area. One evening we were in Kemmerer, Wyoming, wrestling a dual and Kemmerer did not have any heavy weights so they wanted to see Rulon and Reynold wrestle an exhibit match. So we obliged them. This is the only time that I can remember Rulon defeating his older brother and he did it in a big way. Rulon pinned Reynold in front of a pretty big crowd in Kemmerer and Reynold was really upset. As their father Reed said, "There was hell to pay" and Reynold tormented Rulon at home and at school for at least a week. Rulon handled it pretty good, he always respected and loved his brother Reynold.

Many people have always said that Rulon could have beaten Reynold in the wrestle off if he had really wanted. I always saw it differently. Rulon would always give it his all. Many times I would have to step in and settle them down.

Rulon was always the aggressor and he was going to go after his opponents from the opening whistle. He always thought that he was in superior condition and if he kept the pressure on he would wear his opponent down until he could defeat him. This was his style with his brother Reynold in the wrestle offs. Rulon was overly aggressive, Reynold was very patient and would wait until



Rulon made a mistake then he would capitalize on that mistake. This patient attitude carried Reynold on to a National Championship at Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho. Reynold finished his career at Oregon State.

I always wished that we could have taken both Rulon and Reynold to the State Championship because they were the best heavy weights in the 3A class in

the state of Wyoming for the 1989 year. Star Valley went on to win the 3A State Championship in 1988. Rulon was a member of the team but he was not on the varsity team and yet he was at least the second best heavy weight in 1988. Reynold won the heavy weight championship that year, and Rulon was there on the sidelines cheering his brother on to that championship.

As a junior all of the coaches wanted Rulon to wrestle in the varsity division because the JV wrestlers were scared to death of Rulon and we loved to have both Rulon and Reynold in the varsity tournaments. Most of the coaches never really knew which was Rulon or which was Reynold. In the seeding meetings we would call one Big Gardner and the other Big Big Gardner. At the next tournament one was known as Earthquake Garner and the other one as Freight Train Gardner. If by chance a coach had a wrestler who had defeated Rulon or Reynold (which was very seldom) they would get totally confused as to which one they had defeated. We would all get laughing and in the end Big Gardner and Big Big Gardner would have the 1 and 2 seed. We as coaches of the team really had not determined who was Big Gardner or who was Big Big Gardner. After the seeding meeting we had to make that determination.

Rulon really owes a lot to his brother Reynold because he made Rulon a much better wrestler. Week in and week out they were going at each other. They were ferocious competitors. Neither one wanted to let the other one get the best of him. If one brother got the other brother in a hold where he could inflict some great pain he would bawl like a



Rulon celebrating with his hometown crowd in Afton, Wyoming after his victory in the Olympics.

calf and everyone in the wrestling room knew that one brother was in pain, and the other brother was really loving it. I am sure they learned this from working with the calves on the dairy farm.

In 1989, Rulon's senior year, we did not have nearly as much fun because Reynold was gone and someone had to wrestle with Rulon. Coach Bill Hoopes was too small and coach Ed Bruce said he had a bad knee or some other excuse. Lucky for us we found a senior who was a decent heavy weight by the name of Rick Johnson. Rick came out and wrestled with Rulon every day of practice. Rick did not get to wrestle very many matches because he was a senior and could not wrestle in junior varsity tournaments but this didn't bother him. We all owe a lot to Rick for his unselfish attitude. Rulon and Rick have remained good friends over the years and Rulon has always appreciated Rick.

Rulon had a great senior year and the match that we had all wanted to watch was the rematch of Rulon and Bobby Henderson from Rock Springs, Wyoming. Bobby was an outstanding heavy weight, who had a lot of freestyle and Greco Roman experience. Bobby had placed in national tournaments and he had defeated Rulon the year before. Bobby had a great

headlock and in the previous year he threw Rulon in that headlock and when they hit the mat the entire gym shook. Rulon got away and started after Henderson again in his aggressive trademark style. Rulon's aggressive style left him wide open to that Henderson Headlock and within a few seconds Rulon found himself crashing to the mat again in that headlock and he was unable to survive this time.

This year was going to be different. Rulon was still going to be the aggressor but he was going to be in control. Rulon controlled Henderson's elbow of the arm which Henderson used to tie up with. When Henderson tried the headlock Rulon slipped the elbow up over his head and took Henderson down. From there, Rulon ran the spiral. When Rulon got the arm, he inflicted so much pain with his shoulder in his opponent's back and with his weight on the back of the upper arm, the opponent was glad to give Rulon his arm and roll to his back. So it was with Henderson that the match was over in the first period.

This match was the match that told his coaches that he was going to be a great college wrestler. Bobby Henderson was a nationally known wrestler and Rulon had defeated him with ease.

Rulon is a coach's dream. Totally ded-

icated and a gentleman in every aspect. Always willing to accept a challenge and never complain. These attributes were exhibited in Rulon's only loss his senior year. It was in the finals of his own home town tournament. Rulon had defeated his opponent quite easily the year before. So we were not real worried. But at match time Rulon had a high fever and he was obviously very sick. We never had to ask him if he wanted to wrestle even though he was sick. We could tell that he was not going to let the home town fans down and we couldn't have stopped him from wrestling.

We as coaches were extremely proud of Rulon because it was apparent from the start that Rulon was not himself. He fell behind but he never stopped. His over aggressive style got him in trouble a couple of times and he was too weak to counter. He pressed forward, keeping the pressure on his opponent and at the end of the match his opponent was backing up and Rulon was doing all that he could do to gain the victory, but he fell short this time. The courage that he showed that evening made us all proud of him. He never complained or made any excuses. He handled the defeat like a gentleman. 🏆

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