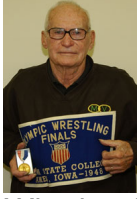


Daise demonstrates life-long devotion to wrestling

Written by Darci Tomky



Whether it was pinning his opponent, coaching high school athletes or keeping the time clock, wrestling has always been a part of life for Gene Daise.

“If you enjoy it, do it!” said Daise, and from the passion evident in his voice, he certainly enjoys wrestling and has been doing it for as long as he can remember.

Daise grew up with a brother who was about one year older than him. “From the time we could walk, we were wrestling,” said Daise.

He participated in both wrestling and basketball during his high school years in Kansas, but college is really where his wrestling career took off.

Daise joined the wrestling team at Colorado A&M (now Colorado State University) in Fort Collins in the 1940s.

This 5'6” tall athlete was described as a “stellar 145-pound star” by the newspapers. Among a long list of wrestling accomplishments, Daise can proudly say he lettered all four years in college and earned the title of conference champion his senior year.

“I had worked for four years to get that,” he said. Daise explained he decided to switch weight classes his senior year in order to avoid wrestling an athlete from Denver who beat him the previous year. The switch did the trick, and Daise claimed first place honors. He said it was definitely the highlight of his college career.

Daise’s passion for wrestling didn’t stop at college competitions. No, his ambitions took him even higher—the Olympics.

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Wrestling in the 136.5-pound class, Daise competed for a chance to be on the United States wrestling team for the 1948 Summer Olympic Games held in London, England.

He participated in the tryouts in the 13th District which included Colorado and four other states. His top finish there landed him a trip to the finals for the Olympic wrestling tryouts at Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa.

Olympic rules in 1948 differed from the rules Daise was used to wrestling at Colorado A&M. He explained that if a wrestler didn't win by a pin, he got a bad mark against him. "Four bad marks and you're out!" he said.

The official rules said, "The fall is the paramount objective of the game, and the contestant who gains a fall is naturally declared the better wrestler and the winner." Even if a wrestler won by a decision, he would still get a bad mark recorded against him.

Daise said with his wrestling style, he didn't win very many pins, so under these unique Olympic rules, he didn't earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic team.

Nevertheless, Daise's Olympic experience is still a highlight in his time as a competitive wrestler.

Wrestling begins at Phillips County High School

After graduating from Colorado A&M in 1950, Daise moved to Holyoke to be the Vocational Ag teacher at Phillips County High School. He left for a couple years to serve in the Korean War, returning to Holyoke in 1953.

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With wrestling playing such a big role in his life, Daise also saw the need for a wrestling program at Phillips County High School. There had been some wrestling and boxing there in previous years, but it was strictly intramural. Daise spoke with Joe Lynch, the school superintendent, and he agreed with Daise that a wrestling team would be a good alternative for the boys not playing basketball.

So in the 1953-54 school year, wrestling joined football, basketball and track as an official sport at Phillips County High School.

The Nov. 26, 1953 Holyoke Enterprise reported 16 wrestlers had signed up for the team compared to the 30 boys signed up for basketball. "Daise is pretty well pleased with wrestling prospect here but says that more lightweights would improve the outlook. The squad is well supplied with heavies."

The new team would be wrestling in a five-school conference with Brush, Yuma, Sterling and Fort Morgan. "Some of the wrestlers in the other schools are experienced, but Daise is not pessimistic about his 'green' crew," reported the Enterprise. "He expects some of them to develop rapidly and to be fine competitors before the season is finished."

The Dragons' season started out pretty rough with wrestlers new to the sport facing athletes from schools much larger than Phillips County High School. But, they did improve during the season and the years to follow.

Daise explained that in the 1950s there was only one division of wrestling in the state of Colorado, so it didn't matter what size of school the wrestler was from, they were all in the same competition.

Holyoke's first state champion came in 1957 when Jim Ferguson claimed the title in the 120-pound class.

Another strong wrestler in the early years was Gary Sperber. He lost in the state championship on a split decision by the judges. Regardless, Sperber's experience as a wrestler under the

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coaching of Daise greatly influenced his life.

“The thing he did for me was build confidence,” said Sperber. He said Daise taught him how to look in the mirror and say, “I can do it!” For him, wrestling under Daise was a “good character builder.”

Even though wrestlers are part of a team, explained Sperber, they can't rely on their teammates. Daise taught him wrestling was about defending himself on the mat, and in order to do that he needed to get rid of the fear of losing in front of people. Wrestling taught Sperber an important life lesson—the choice to hold on to that fear or to embrace the positive parts of a situation.

Sperber went on to develop a deep friendship and respect for Daise and even served as a wrestling coach alongside him in Holyoke. He described Daise as having much self discipline and timeliness.

After many years of coaching, Daise continued to serve the wrestling program in Holyoke. He has helped keep score and run the clock in addition to helping with the peewee wrestling kids.

In 2005, Daise received the CADA Honor Award from the Colorado Athletic Directors Association for his outstanding community service in both football and wrestling.

Since its start in 1953, wrestling in Holyoke has progressed a great deal. Sperber said the technique has improved and the style of wrestling has drastically changed.

Regardless, wrestlers on the mat still carry the same passion that Daise had for the sport in 1953. His enthusiasm for wrestling spread and has continued through the generations.

In addition to Ferguson's state championship in 1957, other state champs from Holyoke High School include Tyler Chappell in 1998, Robbie Doman in 2001, Andrew Colglazier in 2003,

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Landon Bergner in 2004 and Chad Stroh 2008 and 2009. The legacy lives on over 50 years later.

Never giving up his love for the sport, Daise continues to join other Dragon fans as they cheer on the Holyoke wrestlers whether taking on their opponent at a home meet or at the state championship.