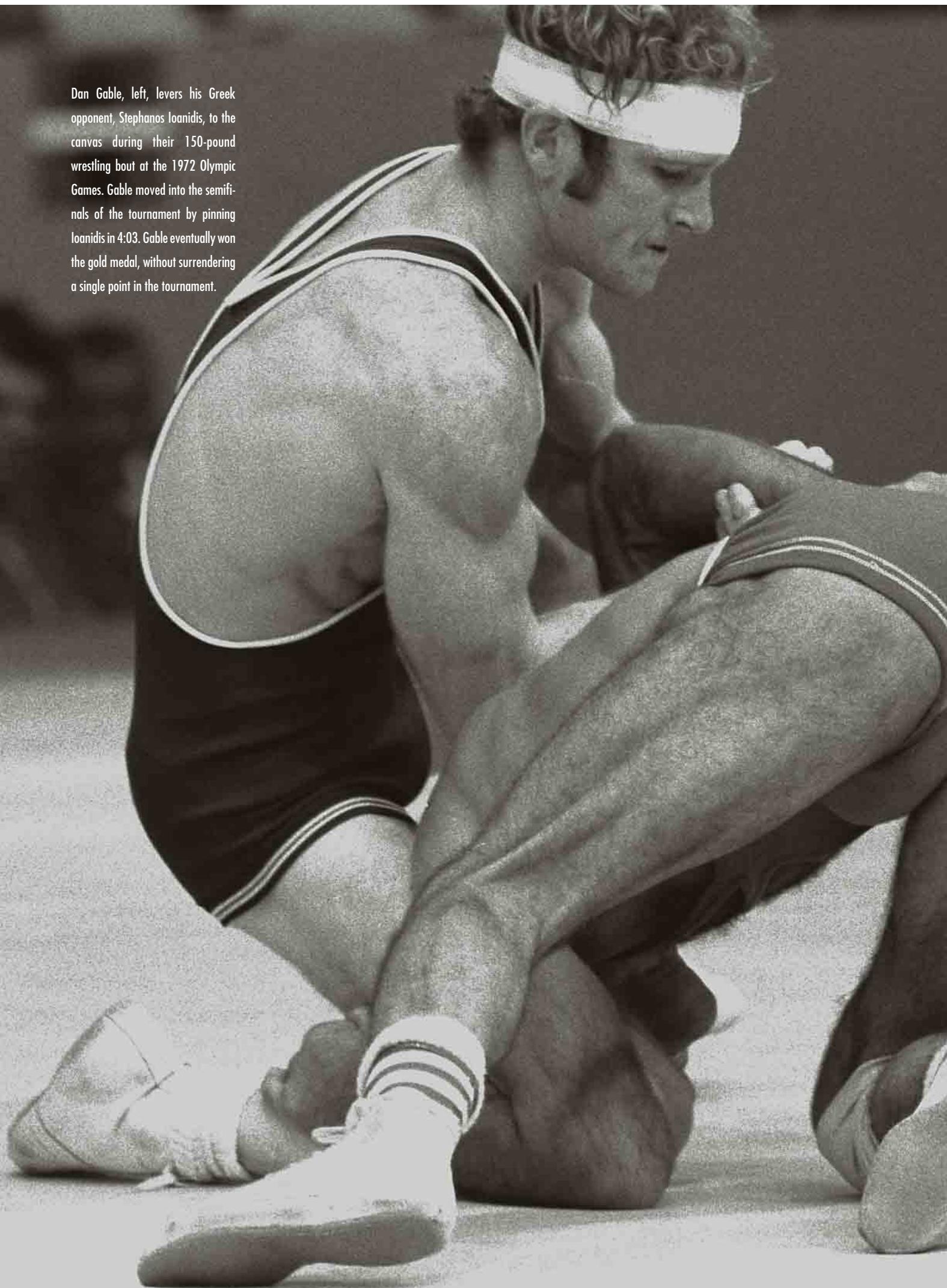


Dan Gable, left, levers his Greek opponent, Stephanos Ioanidis, to the canvas during their 150-pound wrestling bout at the 1972 Olympic Games. Gable moved into the semifinals of the tournament by pinning Ioanidis in 4:03. Gable eventually won the gold medal, without surrendering a single point in the tournament.





# GRAPPLING

## WITH GABLE

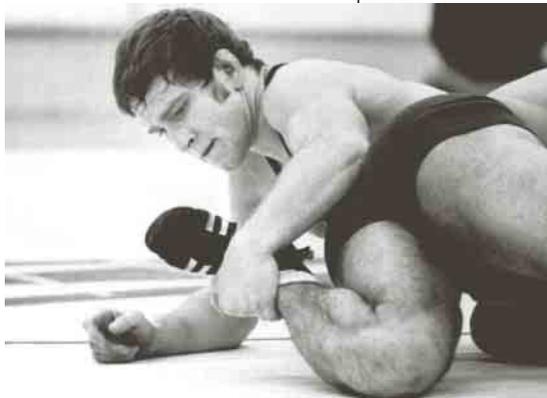
THE LIVING LEGEND, DAN GABLE,  
DISCUSSES HIS SUCCESS STRATEGIES,  
ON AND OFF THE MAT.

INTERVIEW BY JOSEPH A. ARANGIO, M.S., C.S.C.S.

**H**e is an accomplished competitor—the epitome of determination and desire. He dominated the sport of wrestling as both athlete and coach. As an athlete Dan Gable boasted an illustrious career in high school and at Iowa State (182-1), which was highlighted by a gold medal in the 1972 Olympic games. Success followed Gable into the coaching arena, as well. From 1977 to 1997 he amassed a career record of 355-21-5 as the University of Iowa's most prolific wrestling coach. He enjoyed continued coaching success at the Olympic level, producing four gold medallists. Gable continues to work with world-class wrestlers, as well as assist the athletic director at the University of Iowa. He and his wife, Kathy, have four daughters: Jennifer, Annie, Molly and Mackenzie.

**MM: How do your athletes mentally prepare for the physical demands of wrestling?**

GABLE: It isn't done overnight. If you want to accomplish anything that's worthwhile, you've got to be associ-



ated with a great system year-round. I hope to recruit a college or Olympic athlete who realizes what he's getting into—he must do what is told to him and believe it. That ideal situation doesn't always occur. Ideally you recruit the best people for this type of system; however, you still need to develop mental toughness. Reality is, there are very few people out there who possess the extreme mental focus necessary to win.

The better job you do recruiting athletes with this disciplined attitude, the better chance you'll have creating a successful program. When we started to build the wrestling program at the University of Iowa, we had to create something to believe in. When I started coaching, I realized that I had to be the role model. Yet, I soon discovered that I could not do that year after year because I was getting older. So you have to surround yourself with coaches and athletes who are role models. If you have good people working for you, others will believe in your game plan. My best teams had not just one guy who set a good example, but two or three.

Remember that you cannot motivate someone to be a champion by words alone. It takes weeks, months, years—it involves a great time commitment on the part of both coach and athlete. Then you've got to deal with the team *and* the individual. It's much easier to motivate the individual. What you need in the sport of wrestling is for every individual to perform to the best of their ability—then you have a winning team.

**MM: What are your thoughts on staying mentally focused prior to a training session?**

GABLE: It is imperative. I'm a big believer in training the mind as well as the body. I've coached many champions at both the collegiate and Olympic levels. Only a few of my athletes possess the unique mental abil-

**MM: Some coaches feel that desire is innate and cannot be learned. How do you teach drive and passion for winning?**

GABLE: I firmly believe that you can develop this hunger for success. I thrive at the opportunity to transform an athlete from one level to another, or the ability to put something inside of someone that he didn't have before. Here's the problem: If you try and motivate someone for a few weeks and it doesn't seem to work, most athletes and coaches give up. Good athletes and coaches realize that it takes time. In my opinion, it is the coach's obligation to continue to work toward the ideal situation, to strive for perfection. This attitude will benefit the team in the long run. Sometimes it takes years to develop an athlete to his fullest potential—

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ity to deal with competition. The most highly skilled athletes can win, but if you add the mental focus—you have a true champion.

I teach my athletes to be relentless. That's my ideal situation. I want my athletes to give their best effort in practice and during competition. This is challenging in a sport like wrestling because there is a lot of physical pain associated with surviving a six-minute or a nine-minute match. Now you're asking an athlete to go up another notch. I expect an athlete to put points on the scoreboard for the entire match. You need to teach this mentality.

but I've seen it happen. You need confidence and staying power. When you're done, at least you didn't fail in your effort.

**MM: Physical pain is commonplace in every athletic endeavor. What are your thoughts regarding how pain affects a workout session and how to overcome its debilitating effects?**

GABLE: First of all, let's differentiate between the pain associated with fatigue and injury pain. Fatigue pain is routine—you must work through this. Injury pain is bad and should be dealt with appropriately. Working

through injury pain will harm the athlete in the long run.

Every coach says, "Team, you're the hardest working group of athletes in America—you deserve to win." This is a standard coaching theme—but it's not real. Every team cannot be working as hard as the other team, because then everyone would be working the same. In reality there is a difference, and you must acknowledge your rank. If you truly believe that you are a part of the hardest-working team in America—you've got a lot of good things going for you. This psychological strategy will not be accepted unless you can support the words with actions. I want my athletes to believe something that is really true.

It is natural to shut down when you experience the pain associated with training and competition. That is what the body is programmed to do. The key is to find an athlete with the ability to work effectively under this extreme pain associated with fatigue. In time the pain is no longer the primary focus. I had athletes who overcame this pain on a regular basis. Basically they became accustomed to the pain because they believed in the coach's knowledge and teaching ability.

**MM: What is mental discipline and how can one attain it?**

GABLE: You've got to make sacrifices. You can't be the norm. If you're with the mainstream, you will probably achieve average results. There is nothing wrong with the mainstream, by the way—it depends on what you want. The amount that you're willing to sacrifice is directly proportional to your desire for success.

I made many sacrifices over my athletic career. Some gifted athletes can give in to vices, but can still achieve greatness—to a certain point. The higher the level of competition, the more disciplined you have to be. Because of that fact, you must focus on what you're trying to accomplish and avoid temptations that will jeopardize your potential.

**MM: How do the physical stressors of the mat help an athlete train for the pressures of everyday life?**

GABLE: Once you've wrestled, everything else in life is easy. Wrestling is the pinnacle of sport. Just to survive practice is an accomplishment—you will walk away with a lot of character traits that you probably wouldn't have if you didn't participate in a sport like wrestling. In the realm of life, there are other things that are more important—saving human life, curing cancer. Those people in the medical world, who are striving to save lives, are also doing things at an extreme level.

I don't believe in luck. Winning the lottery is luck. You can depend on getting lucky in life or you can make things happen. When I was on the University of Iowa coaching staff, the wrestling team won the Big Ten championship 25 years in a row. This is not luck.

**MM: Please discuss the importance of goal setting—on and off the mat.**

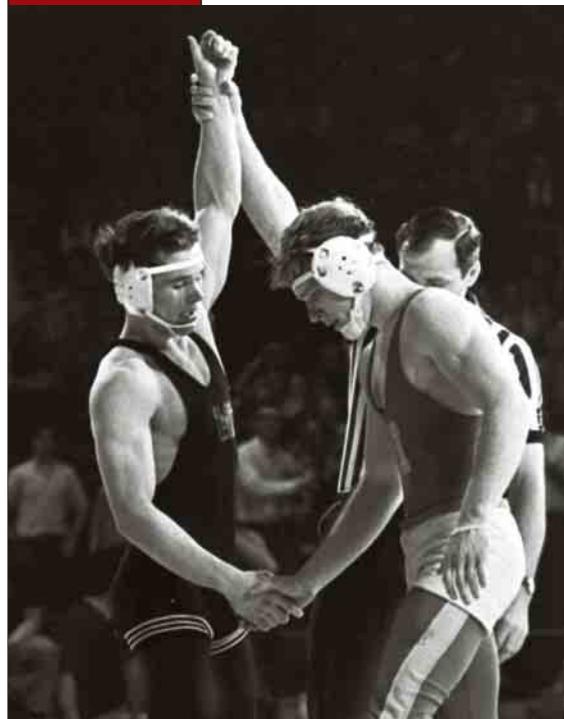
GABLE: I had great role models. One of my college coaches, Dr. Harold Nichols, always looked a few steps ahead of his next move. He had both long-range and short-range

Gable, right, of Iowa State, who was undefeated in his high school and college wrestling career until that evening, congratulates Larry Owings of the University of Washington, March 28, 1970, at Evanston, Ill. Owings has his hand raised in victory after beating Gable in their final 142-pound NCAA championship bout at Northwestern University. It was the only defeat of Gable's storied career.

goals, which he kept in front of him all of the time. I still practice this technique today.

**MM: Differentiate between Dan Gable the coach and Dan Gable the athlete.**

GABLE: Gable the athlete and Gable the coach are two different things. I was an athlete 30 years ago. A lot of things have changed in the fields of training, nutrition and recovery. If you don't pick up on these changes, then you are doing a disservice to your athletes. The things that I did as an athlete, from a mental standpoint, were fine. Yet many of the



training techniques that I followed are responsible for the physical pain that I have today.

As a coach you've got to look out for the welfare of the athlete. That doesn't mean you have to cut corners or accept less than an athlete's best effort—this will only create mental and physical weakness. Rather it means you have to pay strict attention

to research-based concepts of training, sports nutrition and recovery.

**MM: What drives Dan Gable the athlete?**

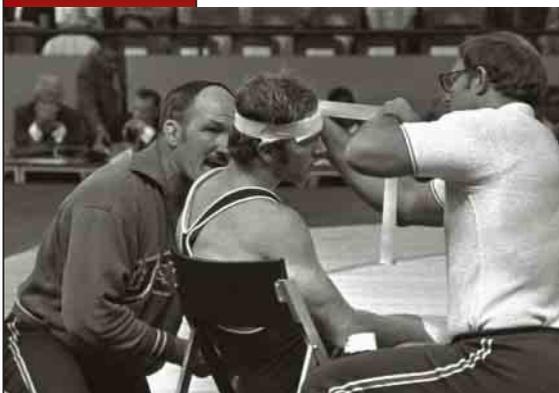
GABLE: The love of my family, friends and a positive environment. The ability to perform for people who love and care about you. Success feels good and it's rewarding inside. Winning can drive you; it can make you do things that are not humanly possible. If you experience the opposite, it hurts. If you continue to experience failure, the hurt is less painful and it doesn't mean as much. Losing can become a bad habit. I was fortunate to have great family support and excellent coaches throughout my career.

As a coach, it is essential to have that same support from your family. Sometimes the athletes are not motivated, so you search for someone in that athlete's family who cares. Now you start coaching from that person's point of view, more than the athlete. Someday the athlete will appreciate his support group.

**MM: How did you train physically to deal with the rigors of wrestling?**

GABLE: It was a different time when I was competing. When you got hurt, you didn't limp to the training room, you picked yourself up and finished practice. That's not the smartest thing to do, but that may have been the thing that pushed me over the edge. From a coaching point of view, you treat the injury immediately. Unless you discover that athletes are feigning injury to skip practice—that's where smart coaching comes into play.

Gable is assisted by a medical aide after suffering a bad cut near the left eye during a freestyle match against Safer Sali of Yugoslavia in the Munich Olympic Games, August 27, 1972. Despite his wound, the eventual gold medalist managed to pin his opponent.



**MM: You underwent hip replacement surgery during the 1996-97 season. How did your experience on the mat help you recover from the surgery?**

GABLE: First of all, I coach my athletes to avoid the training mistakes that I made as an athlete. A good coach has a vested interest in the longevity of the athlete—long after they stop competing in sport. My experience on the mat helped me deal with both hip-replacement surgeries, as well as the rehabilitation process. If you want to be successful in wrestling, you need to be prepared—training, studying, eating properly and resting. I learned a lot about the surgery beforehand. This made me a better patient and helped me recover faster.

**MM: What advice do you have for young athletes with the desire to be successful?**

GABLE: A good athlete works on this desire every day. Surround yourself with good people, a good environment and read about champions as much as you can. One of the books that helped me out when I was a kid was a book called *The Heart of a Champion* by Bob Richards. This is a book about people who had to overcome adversity. Associate yourself with sports heroes.

**MM: How do you teach your athletes to reward themselves after intense training and competition?**

GABLE: In our annual training cycle there are many different phases of training intensity. At certain times during the year, we plan to rest. This helps the athletes perform efficiently and to the best of their ability, while reducing the chance of injury. It's important to make sure that the peaks and valleys occur at the appropriate times during the training cycle. The worst thing that can happen is if you have three weeks to go and you wish the season were over—that is problematic. If you consistently set short-term goals and routinely measure progress, you will be successful most of the time.

**MM: Do you have any training tips for the recreational athlete?**

GABLE: Some of the best people who went through the program didn't even make the team. Once you're done with organized sport, you need to make adjustments. This means changing your eating habits, exercise habits, as well as lifestyle.

And don't forget to reward yourself for a job well done on a weekly, or even daily basis. In my life, physical fitness rejuvenates me. Exercise helps me deal with the everyday stressors of life. In addition, I never let a day go by that I don't do something positive for my family or my profession.

**Editor's Note:** For more information on Dan Gable, check out *A Season on the Mat* by Nolan Zavoral ([www.dangable.com](http://www.dangable.com)), and *Coaching Wrestling Successfully* by Dan Gable ([www.hkusa.com](http://www.hkusa.com)). 