

Gorgeous Dan

by John Irving

The almost undefeated life of the world's best wrestler

The University of Iowa field house is a reservoir of people with different purposes. It is a Saturday morning in November. The Hawkeye Marching Band is practicing at the end of the field house near the vending machines. It is Dad's Day on campus, and Iowa's football team will, predictably, lose 31-0 to Michigan several hours from now. Since the field house is close to the stadium, many early arrivals to that game have parked their cars nearby and are killing time. Since it's cold, they're killing time indoors, wandering through the field house as if the building were a kind of random museum. There are the "Dads" of former Iowa football teams wearing little black golf caps with a yellow "I" stitched above the visor. And there are Moms with blankets and cushions for the stadium, and picnic baskets they will open later in the field house, up high in some choice balcony seats no one would mind having for a basketball game. Lani Jo Gill, Iowa's baton twirler, sits in the second row of bleachers, a glitter of gold in her coin-encrusted bathing suit; she flicks her baton; she sits there as languidly as a beached mermaid.

Three regulation-size mats are laid together on the field-house floor, next to the area where the basketball team is practicing; the wrestling team is gathering for a workout. They are loosening up, tumbling, doing their sit-ups and neck bridges and touching their toes. An audience gathers around the wrestlers.

Then the word goes around. Someone among the fans has been following more than football. He knows that the Iowa wrestling coach has a new assistant this year. Out on those mats is the best wrestler in the world, and though this audience killing time doesn't have more than a couple of genuine wrestling fans among them, everyone is interested in someone who's the "best"—at anything. A murmur starts going around: Dan Gable is helping out at the wrestling workouts this year. The champion of the World Games at Sofia, the gold medalist at the Munich Olympics—the winningest wrestler in the sport today and wrestling's closest approximation to a celebrity. A legend of physical conditioning, he runs more miles, lifts more weights, and puts in more wrestling hours than any other competitor in the sport. Dan Gable has been ap-

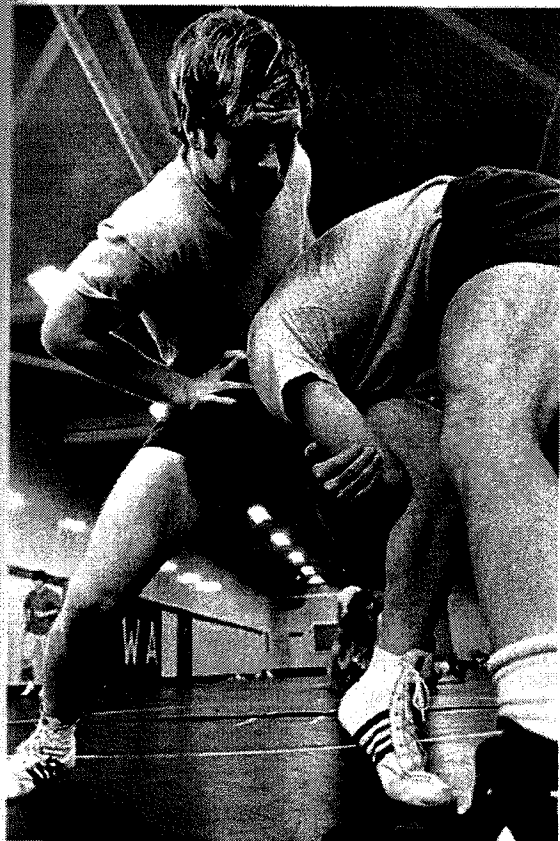
pointed "supervisor of physical-fitness programs for athletes at the University of Iowa," a title which protects his amateur standing under Olympic rules. Officially, he's not *salaried* for anything connected with the sport of wrestling.

A white-haired man in a "Dad's" black Iowa cap approaches a trainer who's juggling some spools of adhesive tape. "Which one is Gable?" In the half-speed skirmishes in progress on the mat, the football fans look for obvious winners. One of Iowa's co-captains, Jan Sanderson, is mistaken for Gable. Sanderson, a five-foot, six-inch, 168-pounder, is an impressively muscular wrestler. He looks like he's tough, and he is. His nose is split from his left nostril to near the corner of his eye. That looks impressive. The football fans don't know the split nose is from the rugby season which Sanderson has just finished; someone with cleats stepped on his face.

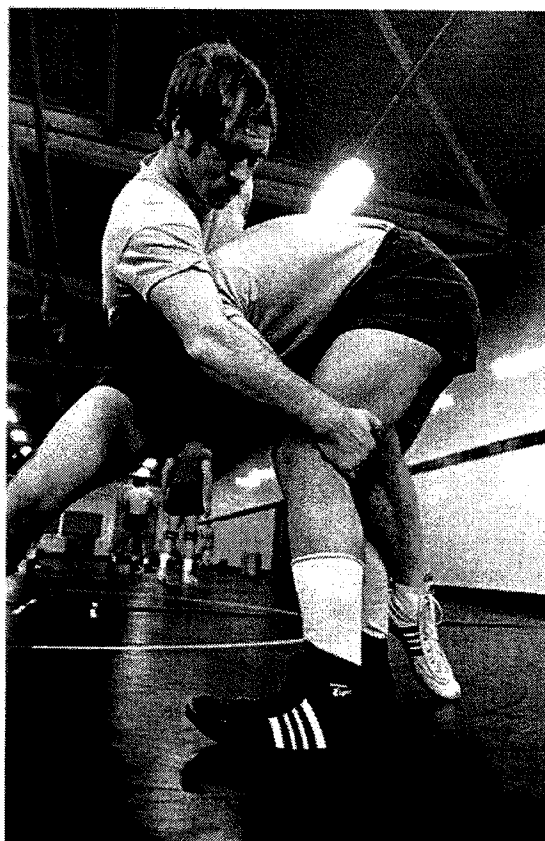
The trainer with his spools of tape looks bored. He squints at the wrestlers and shakes his head. "Gable's not here yet," he says. Disappointed, the football fans wander away. When Dan Gable comes barefoot out of the locker room, carrying his dirty-white wrestling shoes under his arm, wearing his ear guards askew—like a relaxed disc jockey between numbers—no one notices him at all.

Dan Gable started wrestling when he was seven years old. He won his first championship when he was twelve—a Y.M.C.A. tournament in Waterloo, Iowa, Gable's hometown. Waterloo, the big city of Black Hawk County, is wrestling country. Gable grew up with wrestling the way most American boys grow up with football, basketball and baseball. His father took him to the matches; his father and his father's friends talked wrestling round the kitchen table. He was the lone son of the family, and his basement was provided with a set of barbells (a present from his parents when he was thirteen) and a wrestling mat (a present when he was fifteen). Gable says he wrestled his way to three consecutive State Championships before he had even entered high school—all alone, in the basement of his house, he would wrestle one pretended opponent after another.

Gable's Gambit



Dan Gable (white shoes) tempts Iowa's Jan Sanderson into making first move, a deep single-leg pickup of Gable's left leg. Gable drives into Sanderson; most wrestlers would push away. Sanderson carries all of Gable's weight on back of his neck.



Gable traps Sanderson's head under his belly and right arm. Driving off his right leg, Gable steps left leg behind Sanderson's right—preventing Sanderson from moving back. Gable snaps up Sanderson's leg at knee, driving him backward, off-balance.

He'd work out with the barbells between matches.

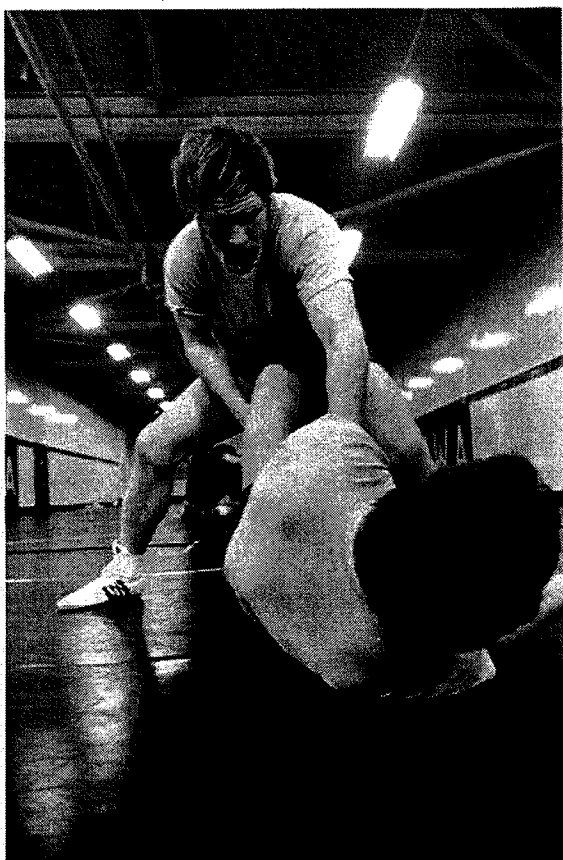
His first *real* competition was at the Y.M.C.A., and the sport was swimming. He says the first time he stepped out of the pool—the last one to finish—he wanted to feel as good as the swimmer who stepped out first. He wanted to win.

He did, but not swimming. He won three consecutive State Wrestling Championships at West High of Waterloo. He developed a style of training which other wrestlers have envied, and also thought—candidly—was a bit crazy. As a high-school sophomore, there were wrestlers on the West High team who could beat him. When they'd leave practice, Gable would stay. He says he used to think, as he was working out in over-time, that he was gaining on them—working when they were showering, sipping milk shakes, taking it easy. Through college, he kept that perspective. "When I'd get tired and want to stop," he says, "I'd wonder what my next week's opponent was doing, I'd wonder if he was still working out. When I could see him still working, I'd start pushing myself. When I could see him in the shower, I'd push myself harder. I knew I was putting in more time. You've got to have a tough *mind*. If you know you haven't cheated, physically, in your preparation, that makes you mentally tough." What made him mentally tough was knowing—when he faced *anybody*—that he could go as hard as he could

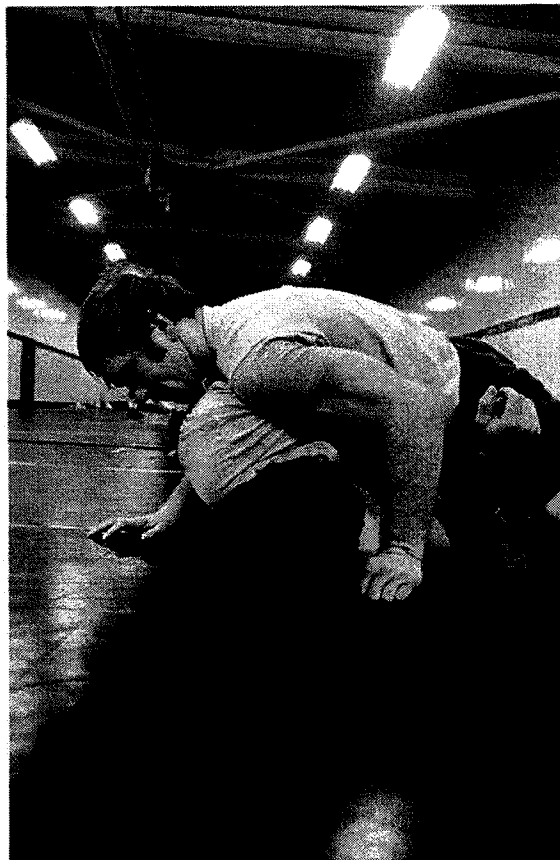
from start to finish, and the other guy would give out before he would. "You have to get high for every match," he says.

Gable got high enough to compile three State Championships in high school and two National Championships at Iowa State University. He approached the last match of his college career, the finals of his third N.C.A.A. tournament, with a record of one hundred and eighty-one wins, no ties, no losses. If Gable won his third N.C.A.A. title, he'd become the first wrestler in history to go undefeated and untied through high school and college.

He was not unnoticed. *Sports Illustrated*, anticipating the unprecedented perfect record, photographed Gable as he worked his way toward the finals, interviewing him, setting up what would have been one of the biggest spreads a major sports magazine ever gave to amateur wrestling. In the past year Gable had received two dozen letters a week. In his third National Championships, at Northwestern University, the crowd flocked to whatever mat Gable was wrestling on. He didn't disappoint anybody. He pinned his first five opponents, needing slightly more than four minutes for each. As the three-day tournament was winding up to that last showdown, 31,000 fans and almost 400 wrestlers were convinced Dan Gable was unbeatable. A number of good wrestlers had gone out of their way—



Gable's stiff arm strikes Sanderson low on the shoulder, drops him to his hip with left leg still caught at the knee. Gable keeps his hold on Sanderson's leg so Sanderson can't turn off his back. Gable stays on his feet until Sanderson is controlled.



Gable drops down on Sanderson, keeping his own weight low on Sanderson's body and pivoting fast toward Sanderson's head. Note Gable's right hand on the mat for balance; left arm will manipulate Sanderson's head into a pinning position.

gaining weight or losing it—to avoid the 142-pound class, conceding that the weight class *belonged* to Gable.

But there was one wrestler who came to Evanston, Illinois, unimpressed. A sophomore at the University of Washington, Larry Owings had wrestled Gable before—in the 1968 Olympic trials, when Owings was a high-school senior and Gable was already a National Champion. Gable had beaten him. Owings had made up his mind that he'd wrestle Gable again, and take him. He went out of his way to put himself in Gable's weight class. He dropped from 173 pounds. Owings says he "almost had to stop eating completely to make 142."

That took a sense of purpose which Dan Gable could understand. Owings walked out on the mat against Gable about as mentally tough—about as high—as Dan Gable says you've got to be.

"I had a letdown," Gable says.

Gable is a crowd pleaser. He comes out shooting and he'll shoot right through to the end. Gable took Owings down in twenty-seven seconds of the opening period (2-0, Gable); Owings escaped twenty-nine seconds later and worked a takedown on Gable with a fireman's carry, just as the first period ended (3-2, Owings). Owings escaped to start the second period, then—*amazingly*—took Gable down again (6-2, Owings).

Gable lost another point for intentionally going off the mat (7-2, Owings). Then, *slam-bang*, Gable got a reversal, Owings an escape and Gable another takedown (8-6, Owings). By the end of the second period, 8500 fans were on their feet and screaming.

Owings started the third and last period on top; Gable reversed him and tied the score (8-8). Then Gable got tough. He rode Owings around, looking for the pin, wearing him down and picking up riding time at a point a minute. Owings finally got free with only a minute and three seconds remaining on the clock (9-8, Owings), but Gable had better than a two-minute riding-time advantage (10-9, Gable). When there were only thirty seconds left, Owings slipped under Gable's arm; they were locked tight, chest to chest, when Owings looked down and saw Gable's feet. "I knew I had to go for them," Owings says. He got *one* of them—enough for the takedown (11-10, Owings); he also picked up two predicament points for driving Gable's shoulders near the mat (13-11, Owings). Gable needed a takedown to tie it; he had seventeen seconds to get one. But Gable didn't seem to know about the predicament points against him. He appeared to think it was all tied up, and in a few seconds they'd be going into an overtime period. He shot a takedown, missed it; Owings shot back—he missed, too—and they both rolled off the mat. The referee stopped the clock. When

Gable walked back on the mat, there were only three seconds left and he knew by the din of the crowd that he'd lost his first one. At the buzzer, it was Owings who tried for one more takedown; holding him off, Gable just stood there, dropping down on one knee: 13-11, *Owings*.

In one hundred and eighty-two matches, Dan Gable had finally lost one. *Sports Illustrated* ran a brief article, without photographs, on the Owings-Gable match; mainly, the article was about Larry Owings and his great upset.

Gable says he never felt he was even in the match. He felt tired, listless, "like I was losing all the way. Even though it was a close match, and I could have won it right up to the end, I *felt* like I was getting beat the whole time."

always dream a lot," Dan Gable says.

He has reddish-blond hair; a sparse, fair moustache, so close to his skin color that it's almost unnoticeable. He's five feet nine; in normal clothes, he looks small. He is thick-shouldered rather than broad-shouldered; he wears tight pants and his legs, relative to the rest of him, appear skinny. He has a bobbing, athletic walk which, if you're following him, is comic. He swings his arms; he *touches* things as he walks past them, tapping a car fender, flicking a parking meter. If there's a small stone on the sidewalk, he'll kick it along in front of him, playing with it. He is no stroller; when he walks, he hurries; the object of walking is to get somewhere. The feeling Gable gives off is restless energy; he has to burn up a lot of it before he can relax.

This is a noncompetitive year for Gable, which is why he's in the Iowa field house this Saturday. He's decided to take a year off from the active wrestling circuit (even the Russian-American matches this spring) and devote himself to coaching and making up his mind about whether he'll compete again. But for a wrestler who's not competing, he's still in better shape than most who are. Less than ten pounds over his Olympic weight (149.5), Gable could weigh in with a week's notice.

Out of normal dress, in wrestling tights, Gable no longer looks small. His wrists resemble ankles, his forearms approach the size of the normal human calf, his upper arms are respectable thighs. He has no hips, no ass, like a ten-year-old boy; his legs are as sinewy as a sprinter's. Like a turtle, he can make his neck disappear. I imagine I've seen young girls with waists that are smaller around than Dan Gable's neck. His shoulders are a big man's knees. It is not a *beautiful* body; it has no Greek design and the muscles lack the definition desired by beach prima donnas. Gable's body is pure function; it looks built to perform. It is no more pretty than an axhead. It is no more elaborate than a hammer.

In sixteen years of wrestling, Gable has had no serious injury to his torso. A knee injury almost caused him to miss the Olympics; an operation was suggested, but he was worried that he'd heal more slowly from the operation than from the injury. He declined the operation and worked at ways to wrestle with one good knee. In learning to defend the weak knee, he says he became a smarter wrestler.

He has the philosophy—"most of the time"—that you wrestle differently in practice than you do in a match. In practice, Gable lets people get in on him; he lets them *almost* take him down. He purposefully exposes himself to vulnerable positions so that no position he might ever find himself in—in a match—will

feel unfamiliar. As a consequence, he appears the most knowledgeable and unawkward wrestler in the sport: he never looks surprised. In a match, of course, he'll give no easy openings to anyone. And even in practice, he won't give you a shot at that bad knee.

"He's the smartest guy I ever wrestled," says Fred Penrod, Iowa's 190-pounder. "You get the feeling he always knows what you're going to do before you do it."

"I do know," Gable says. He says it like he might say, "I wear a size-nine shoe."

Gable wrestles in constant contact with an opponent; he won't stand back and shoot from the outside. "I've got to have my hands on you," he says. He makes quick contact and keeps it, as if by touching you he can read the signals your body's sending that you wish you could conceal. "Once he gets hold of you," says a frustrated Iowa wrestler, "he can do it to you *blind*." There have been very good blind wrestlers in the sport, actually: some wrestlers are familiar with coaches who hold blindfolded workouts, insisting that a wrestler must learn not to telegraph a move to his opponent—and learn to feel the opponent who telegraphs his moves.

Dan Gable *controls* a wrestling match. His reflexes flow into one another. Most wrestlers have an initial move which, if countered, they can offset with *another* move, a re-counter which their opponent might counter again, and so on, until someone's chain of reactions comes up shorter. The wrestler who scores can extend his chain of reactions the smoothest, the quickest and the longest.

Fred Penrod, who outweighs Gable by almost forty pounds, says, "You've got to get to him first. If you don't get him on the first move, you're in trouble, because he'll keep moving at you and make you react, and then he'll move again, and you'll react again, and then he'll do something else—until you make the wrong reaction." Penrod is a frequent workout partner with Gable at Iowa because his strength and weight advantage can take a little edge away from Gable's superior ability. Occasionally, Penrod can make his first move work. "Sometimes," he says, "I can just catch him and make something work that probably wouldn't work if he were my size. I can just bull him over, *sometimes*." Eventually, Gable just wears Penrod down.

When he's exhausted one opponent, Gable's wrestling (and coaching) method is to go pick a fresh partner.

"The only way we can give him enough of a workout to satisfy him," says Iowa co-captain Jan Sanderson, "is to line up and take turns. We each get a minute with Dan, then a fresh guy goes in. Gable stays in there, wrestling a minute with all of us. After he's been out there a long while, we begin to get to him."

Jon Marks, a big, cheerful, ardent wrestling fan, and a non-wrestling roommate of Gable's in Iowa City, knew Dan when he wrestled for Iowa State and, after he'd graduated, when he prepared for the World Games in Bulgaria and the Munich Olympics. Marks says that in the last year of workouts before Munich, Gable would go home to Waterloo every weekend to see his parents. Gable would bring along someone to work out with, so he wouldn't miss a day of wrestling. "Eventually," Marks says, "Dan would be bringing home five or six guys every weekend, and his Mom would have to feed them all. The only way he could get enough of a workout was to bring home five or six. He'd wear out any two or three wrestlers before he even started to get tired. (Continued on page 217)

GORGEOUS DAN

(Continued from page 109) He'd even work out with Chris Taylor. And he could give Taylor a real workout too."

Taylor, a bronze medalist in the unlimited class at the Olympics, lost only one freestyle match at Munich—a disputed 3-2 decision to the defending World Champion and Russian gold medalist, Alexander Medved. Chris Taylor weighs 400 pounds. He has a weight advantage over Gable of 250 pounds.

At Munich, Gable suffered a cut over one eye in the first match, but he was never even pushed. He began with a pin over Yugoslavia, followed with a 20-0 decision over West Germany, then pinned Greece and decisioned Kikuo Wada of Japan (the silver medalist), 6-0. In his fifth match Gable pinned Poland, moving into the finals without having had a point scored on him in five matches and winning three by falls. He was, he admits, cautious in the last one; he had not wrestled Ruslan Ashuraliev of the Soviet Union before. After the World Games in Bulgaria, and several dual meets in this country and in the Soviet Union, the Russians promised to find a wrestler who would beat Gable in Munich. Gable decisioned Ashuraliev 3-0; he dominated the match, entirely, working a neat single-leg takedown in each of the first two periods and winning a caution point when Ashuraliev was called for stalling in the third. Russia ended up with a bronze medal. Gable took the gold without losing a point to anyone.

And if the great loss of his career haunted him for long, he dispelled his own and anyone else's doubts about the 1970 match with Larry Owings by soundly beating Owings in the Olympic trials for Munich. Gable controlled the whole match, says he never felt in danger, says he knew he shouldn't have lost to him the first time. He beat Owings 7-1, "... just being careful. No mistakes."

Oddly, in two N.C.A.A. championships that Larry Owings wrestled in—after his stunning upset of Gable—he could never win another title.

"Owings never got up again," Gable says. "He was never so high as when he beat me."

It's "getting high" that makes Gable wonder whether he'll wrestle again himself. In a career of more than three hundred matches, he says he got up for every one—before and after Owings. "If you put them all together, that's almost a whole year of psyching yourself up as high as you can go, every day. Maybe that's enough. And," he adds, the favorite son of Waterloo, "my Mom and Dad would like me to stop."

But forget, for a moment, the picture of Midwest regularity. He had an older sister, once; she had graduated from high school and was living at home, working in Waterloo, when Gable and his mother and father took a fishing trip to the Mississippi. That was after he'd won his first State Championship for West High of Waterloo, his sophomore year. The Gables were called home from their fishing when Dan's sister

Diane, was found dead in the Gable home. A neighborhood boy, and a former high-school classmate of Diane's, had raped and murdered her and mutilated her body with a knife.

"It must have had some influence on Dan," says Jon Marks, but Gable rarely speaks of it. Only this: that when his mother and father wanted to sell the house and move, Dan insisted that they keep the house and stay. "So we can remember her," he said. The Gables stayed.

Mack Gable, Dan's father, is a former wrestler, ruddy-faced, short and thickly built. Dan's mother, Kate, is a young-looking, statuesque brunette. They have followed Dan's wrestling everywhere. Diane's death must have made their interest in Dan all the stronger ("He's their whole life," says Marks).

We are going to Solon, Iowa, where Dan Gable is giving a speech. Gable is dressed in his summer-weight Olympic team blazer and blue-striped bell-bottoms. A red, white and blue sports shirt is open at his throat. He puts a ski parka over the costume because it's twenty-eight degrees and snowing outside. In his car, he searches for something among piles of jogging suits. "Where's the medal?" he says. "They always want to see the medal," he explains, and shows it to me—the big gold one with his name and "free-style wrestling at 68 kg" written in German.

He wears glasses to drive, and he drives fast, finding the Cedar Rapids station for twenty-four-hour country-and-western music and singing along.

We are going to Saint Mary's Auditorium for a banquet in honor of Solon's first football championship. Gable is the guest speaker; he could go to such a banquet every night, he says, but he doesn't normally accept such a small-town affair. The Solon coach, Dan Wheeler, is a friend.

We get to Solon half an hour early ("I hate to be early, anywhere," Gable says). Gable takes off his glasses when he gets out of the car; we find a bar. Inside, Gable drinks one beer swiftly; he's thirsty; in an average workout, he loses six pounds. "I eat and drink what I want," he explains. Unlike most wrestlers, Gable has never dieted. He works out so hard and so long that he can wrestle in the weight class nearest his natural weight. He thinks the weight-cutting habit of wrestlers is bad for them, mentally, and that "if they simply wrestled as hard as they could, all the time, they wouldn't have to worry about losing enough weight to wrestle the smaller guys."

The Solon Gala Football Banquet is hosted by the town firemen, and you quickly get the feeling that the entire town is being honored for the conference title. Sixty-four football players and four coaches receive awards.

I am sitting next to a priest who's supposed to give the blessing before we eat. A fireman comes up to whisper to him that some people at the end of the banquet hall have already been served—

worse, have already begun to eat. "Is it too late to say Grace, Father?" he asks.

"I don't think it matters," the priest says. He stands up at the table, *chinks* a heavy milk glass with his spoon, cups his hands to his mouth and *hollers* for attention.

Dan Gable sits at the guest table up on the stage; he drums his fingers on the tabletop; he jiggles one knee up and down, up and down. When Coach Wheeler introduces him as "the best athlete in the world," there is prolonged, stand-up applause. "He's as good a wrestler as that Alcindor or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, or whatever his name is, is a basketball player!" Wheeler says.

Gable is not used to much talking, but he is familiar enough with giving this kind of speech so that he isn't self-conscious. "Because of athletics," he says, "I feel I can handle about everything."

His speech is a sincere, personal pep talk. He admits that he wants to "inspire" people. "I want to talk about life overall in general," he begins. He starts out telling how he pretended he was a football player when he was a kid. "I'd move all the furniture around, make a kind of obstacle course, pretend I'd have to dodge between a chair and a table without touching them and dive on the couch." The couch was the end zone. "I was always the ball carrier," he says. Like the imaginary wrestling season, undefeated, in his basement.

He honors his parents. "They never pushed me, but they were behind me a hundred percent."

He talks about losing to Larry Owings. "Because I made that mistake, it made me a better wrestler." Set goals. Work harder than anybody else. Believe in yourself.

It is not a long speech. It takes longer to sign the autographs—to let people touch, pick up, weigh in their hands and put around their necks his Olympic gold medal. The adults are as interested as the kids, and even more shy. A woman, one of the Moms who got our applause, is smoothing her dress at the foot of the stairs leading to the stage. She has almost the body and every bit of the bounce of the cheerleaders (also awarded). Her friends tease her.

"Go on, you look fine!" they say. "You're just going to shake his hand, not wrestle with him!"

Titters at the mere idea!

"If you wrestled him, you know who'd win!"

"Oh, I know!" she says, delighted, feigning a swoon.

But more people seem interested in the medal than are actually interested in talking to Gable.

One of the junior-high waitresses asks me for my autograph; I don't mistake for a minute that it's because she's read my novels. It's because I came in with him. "I'm not even famous," I tell her.

In tone with the optimism of Gable's speech, she tells me, comfortingly. "Well, maybe one day you *will* be!" She is a bubble of belief in herself; I sign her paper napkin, under Dan

Gable's name.

Girls? When would he have had the time?

"There's nobody special to him right now," says Joe Wells, one of Gable's roommates in Iowa City. "There was a girl at Ames, when Dan was at Iowa State. I know Dan liked her, but they didn't really spend that much time together. And she married someone else." Joe Wells is an ex-wrestler, a former Big Ten middleweight who's kept himself in wrestling shape—though he's a light-heavyweight now. Wells first saw Gable when Dan was a high-school wrestler attending a summer wrestling clinic at the University of Iowa. He remembers being struck by "this little red-haired kid who never talked to anybody and wrestled very tough, and—I couldn't believe it!—actually took notes!" Two years later, Wells was on the Iowa team which made a recruiting tour of the Iowa high schools; Wells realized who the little red-haired kid was. "We wanted him at Iowa," Wells says, "but he went to Iowa State."

That little red-haired kid, who, as Wells observed, actually took notes, has been a model of all work and no play, and an idol of sportswriters who find Joe Namath's off-the-field image in bad taste. But Gable has not escaped having his own, ironic version of a binge. Gable's one binge that gained the public eye was an evening many of us might have regarded as a night off, but it was still as contradictory to his image as losing.

In the spring before Munich, in Ames, Iowa, Gable returned to his apartment, drained from a workout; he was so tired he came straight home in his wrestling gear, planning to shower at his apartment. He discovered a keg of beer and half the Iowa State wrestling team in his living room; they were throwing a party for a high-school recruit. "I was thirsty," Gable says. "I drank four beers real fast, then took a shower. I was feeling pretty good, you know, but I wasn't drunk."

With a quarter of an inch of beer left in a paper cup, Gable stepped out on the street with two friends. "They were obviously watching the party," Gable says, because a cop arrested him on the spot. The charge? Drinking an intoxicant on a public street—what was left in the paper cup. With complete forgiveness, Gable says, "It was a new cop who got me. He didn't know who I was. When I got to the jail, the other cops—who all knew me—said they wouldn't have bothered me, but since I'd been brought to the jail, they had to keep me."

They kept him just four hours, but it was headline material for every newspaper in the Midwest.

On learning that Gable had been arrested, Iowa State's 177-pounder—and a roommate of Gable's that year—was enraged. "I'm going to protest," he announced, with a fair portion of the keg inside him, and left the party wearing nothing but his I.S.U. gym shorts. It was a cold spring night and the 177-pounder rode a bicycle up to the nearest

traffic light, where he grabbed the door handle of a stopped car. He let the car tow him the two miles downtown to the police station. Somewhere downtown, a surprised policeman witnessed the near-naked wrestler hurtling alongside the car; when the cop realized that the wrestler was attached to the car, he arrested him. "I am protesting the fact that Dan Gable is in jail," the 177-pounder offered in his defense. Obliging, the cop took the 177-pounder to where Gable was.

"I was glad to have the company," Gable says.

The part of the story which most of the Midwest headlines missed was more revealing of Gable than this accidental night on the town. When the 177-pounder was deposited in jail with Gable, he discovered Gable doing chin-ups from a pipe that ran across the ceiling of his cell.

At heart, the little red-haired kid was still taking notes.

Dan Gable still has much to learn about the bizarre problems of the famous. He announced to the local papers his brainchild for the Iowa wrestling team's publicity: "mat maids," girls who would be scorers and timekeepers for the wrestling matches. The "Chairperson" for the Council of Associated University Women attacked Gable with little regard for his innocence. In a university town, the movement considers nothing to be trivial—and little with a sense of humor.

"Those feminists are crazy," Dan Gable says.

Gable has attracted other "crazies." A visitor to his parents' home in Waterloo came from Miami Beach with vague real-estate "deals" and glowing with praise for Dan Gable as "the kind of man America needs more of." The man worked himself into quite an agitated state in the Gables' kitchen, then peeled off his shirt, kicked off his shoes, stripped down to his boxer underwear ("Right in front of my mother," says Dan) and said he wanted to wrestle the Olympic sensation there on the kitchen floor. He'd come all the way from Miami Beach, he said, to wrestle the World Champion.

Gable says the man was in his fifties, "with a pretty fair pot belly." He suggested that the wrestling mat in the famous basement was softer than the kitchen floor, and led the man downstairs. "I asked him if he wanted some sweat clothes, or a jock," Gable says, "and he asked me, 'Are you going to wear a jock?' I told him I wasn't and he said he wouldn't wear one either, to be fair." The man, Gable says, had obviously never wrestled before. "He danced all around me, whooping and getting out of breath and batting the back of my head with his hands. Then he grabbed my fingers and tried to bend them back, like he'd seen the pro wrestlers do on TV, probably, and I thought he might bust them. I mean, it hurt. So I worked a little foot-kick on him and he just sat down on the mat, looking sort of surprised, and he grabbed the back of his neck like he'd

been hurt. 'I just remembered,' he said, 'the doctor told me not to do anything too strenuous. I got a bad neck.'"

So it was over, the man dressed himself, wheezing like a winded hog, clapping Gable on the back, saying how it had all been a real pleasure and what did his family want for Christmas? "I thought maybe he'd come to get me to wrestle him so he could sue me if I hurt him in my own house," Gable says. But the man left quickly, promising to see them all again, "going on about what we all wanted for Christmas."

Gable's mother told him he might expect more of these encounters. I tell him it's like the westerns where the retired gunfighter is always getting picked on by some fool who wants to see if he's faster. Gable thinks it over. He shrugs.

Ten years ago I retired from the 130-pound class, after about eight years of wrestling. I was never that good a wrestler, but at the University of Pittsburgh I got to wrestle a number of people who were very good. I weigh three pounds less than Dan Gable right now; I'm a former lightweight, ten years out of shape, lapsed into the middleweight class.

Gable is very kind to me. In sympathy with my wretched condition, he consents to wrestle only takedowns. We will just shoot takedowns, then go back up to the neutral position on our feet and shoot takedowns again. After a takedown occurs, he promises not to press any advantage down on the mat (the part of wrestling which is really exhausting—when you're fighting off a pin or just carrying the weight of the man who's riding you). These are ideal conditions for me; we work only a two-minute period at a time, letting me recuperate between rounds—encouraging my lungs to re-inflate.

The first unsettling feeling when you're wrestling Gable is that you can't feel where his weight is. He feels completely uncommitted; you can't sense how he's leaning, which way he's getting ready to go. He doesn't seem to be driving you or pulling you, yet he's always moving—giving you quick shoves and tugs, keeping you constantly off-balance. You know if you just stand there, he'll move on you; so you feel hurried into moving first, and always, when you move, you have no certain sense of what he's set up for. Worse, you never feel quite balanced yourself.

I have a favorite series of first moves and counters—a cross-leg pull which, if you miss it, sets up a duck-under to the other side; if you miss the duck-under, there's a leg waiting to be picked up. I could usually work that, at least once—even on wrestlers I lost to. It was down on the mat where I lost most of my matches; on the feet I was, what my old coach called, "a halfway-decent wrestler." So I set up for my one score on Dan Gable, trying to get him to step across his body with his left leg—toward me. I spend thirty seconds trying to conceal how I want him to step, and then he steps. He just sticks his left leg in front of me; it's a gift—it's bait, I realize, feeling uncannily inept;

he *knows* I want his left leg, so he is offering it. Clearly, a trap. I hesitate, and of course you *never* hesitate, so he takes me down while I'm making up my mind.

Next time I fake going for the right leg and come back for the left; it isn't there; I come back for the duck-under to his right side. To my surprise I come up behind him; I pick him up at the right hip. Good penetration, that's called; all I have to do is fall on him, but as we fall he does *something*, somehow, and I lose my balance. Rather than fall on him, I pull him on top of me.

That's the consistent feeling with Gable; you feel you've almost got something and then, stupidly, you lose your balance. After losing your balance a *lot*, you suspect you're not simply losing it all by yourself.

I lie on my back on the warm-up mat, re-discovering breathing, slowly—starting up at the ceiling dome of the fieldhouse. A kind of cork insulation—like wood, the color of sand—panels the ceiling between the latticework of girders. Way up there—a four-story ceiling, at least—a butter knife is stuck into the cork paneling. It's too high up to notice if you're not looking for it; Jon Marks pointed it out to me and told me how it got there.

Six years ago, after an inter-squad match, one of the losers—who'd just lost the starting position in his weight class—stomped off the mat and went slamming in a fury toward the training room. Before he got there, something on the floor caught his eye. It was a butter knife. No one knows how it got there. He picked it up, swore, spun around; with the knife held in his hand like a discus, he released the knife upward—heaving it with such velocity, miraculously threading the network of girders, that it stuck forever in the ceiling of the fieldhouse dome.

Lying on my back on the warm-up mat, I cannot imagine a losing wrestler with enough strength left for such a throw. I have been counting takedowns. At two points per takedown (college scoring), it is 24-0, Gable.

The wrestlers are down on the mat in the referee's position, one man on his hands and knees, the other man in a position of advantage behind him—one arm around the bottom man's waist, palm on the belly button, the other hand on the bottom man's elbow. They wait for the signal from Gable to go.

Dan Gable paces the mat, setting up the conditions. "Okay!" he hollers. "Bottom man's got ten seconds to get *out* of there. You *got* to get away. Top man's *got* to hold him down. Ready? *Wrestle!*"

Frantic, the bottom wrestlers lunge to get free; desperate, the top men try to ride. Ten seconds is over very quickly. "Who got out?" Gable yells. "Raise your hands." Only a few wrestlers raise their hands. "Okay!" Gable shouts. "Again! Ten seconds..."

The wrestlers' breathing grows heavier. I shut my eyes, thinking of my own lungs. The thudding of their bodies carries on a current to the warm-up mat and into my head. My throat has closed like a sphincter muscle. I have the

familiar "cotton-mouth," which feels worse than cotton—like some dry, hot, furry animal has gone to sleep, or died, on my tongue. "Move!" Gable grunts. "If you're not tired, you're not working hard enough!" The wrestlers' breathing whistles like a violent storm. I think of the butter knife. The man who did that should have his own special award enshrined in the Big Ten Trophy Gallery at the main entrance to the fieldhouse. "Again!" says Dan Gable. "Ten seconds left and you *need* that one point..." The wrestlers groan, but they're not complaining. "Move!"

I open my eyes. Dan Gable is peering down at me. He kicks, gently, at my slack calf. "Ready?" he says; he grins. He nods his head toward the mat. Do I want to try some *more* takedowns? Gable is very generous with his time.

I remember Fred Penrod, the 190-pounder, saying, "It's an honor to wrestle him. I mean, you know he's the best in the world—so you want to wrestle *better* against him and you really get up for it."

I get up. My sweat stings a mat burn under one eye; the skin over that cheekbone feels stretched tight. My lying down has stiffened me up. We find a space between the careening bodies, Gable hunching his shoulders, twisting his neck; he touches his toes once and he's loose. He bounces out in front of me, letting me come to him. Warily, I snatch one of his wrists; he seizes the wrist of my free hand. It is chess in the pawn phase. And I feel caught up with his impossible-to-follow rhythm, again—like a dancer unfamiliar with the music, trying to find the secret pace. Suddenly, I'm enjoying myself. I don't have to suffer the frustration of a competitor; no longer involved with winning, I can simply marvel at how he's going to trap me next. He's moving me by my arm, my whole right side is vulnerable; I compensate, which with Gable always means that you *over-compensate*. I plant my left leg like a tree, all my weight on it; when he drops down to pick it up, I can't possibly move it away.

Up again, looking for loopholes, I begin to relax. Too tired to think, I've fooled myself into believing that the old instincts have returned to me. "Wrestling is a conditioned reflex," my old coach used to say. Meaning, you have to learn it, it *doesn't* come naturally, but you have to learn it so well that it *becomes* natural—like yawning when you see another person yawn, only quicker.

And there is his leg. I take the bait without hesitation. His counter amazes me; I'm on my back with the suspicion that someone has lifted the mat *up* to meet me. My eyes find the butter knife in the ceiling. I must indeed appear to be a very bad wrestler, but I don't mind. I go after him again. When I make contact, he's like a machine who sets us both in motion; it's *his* motion, even when you think it's yours.

"It's like wrestling a computer,"

Fred Penrod says.

But the contact is euphoric to me. When Dan Gable lays his hands on you, you are in touch with grace. ‡