

# Aggressive mind-set aids in win on the mat

By Mike Chapman

Aggressiveness in athletics is, in most cases, a learned behavior, but in time it can become locked into a player's personality. If an athlete uses aggressiveness to achieve success and trains the mind that way, it will become a part of his or her persona. The Brands boys at the University of Iowa are a perfect example of that, as was Dick Butkus on the football field.

During his three years as an All-American linebacker at the University of Illinois and as a perennial All-Pro with the Chicago Bears, Butkus developed a reputation for an aggressive style of play that has become the standard for measuring all tough players in the NFL.

“The name Butkus has come to be virtually synonymous with pro football violence,” wrote Bob Rubin (1973) in his book *Football's Toughest Ten*. Rubin said that most players in the NFL stood in awe of him and that even his teammates didn't know what to think of his aloof manner and vicious play.

“When he doesn't think something's important, he's shy and withdrawn,” said Bears Coach Abe Gibrion. “But then, the whistle blows and he sort of goes crazy. In my 22 years in the league, I've never seen a player with greater desire. Sometimes we have to literally pull him back in practice. He's a once-in-a-generation player” (Rubin 1973, 27).

That type of mental approach to the sport has its roots in environment, and an athlete can learn it. But it probably has to come at an early age. As a young boy growing up in Rapid City, South Dakota, Randy Lewis received some stern advice from his father, Larry--advice that he never forgot. The words changed the way he thought about everything, including the sport of wrestling.

“I was about 10, and was wrestling with a boy who was a lot bigger than me,” said Randy in 2002. “We were in my living room. He got on top of me and held me down. I couldn't get up. He said, ‘If you give up, I'll let you up.’ So, I said ‘I give up.’”

“My dad was watching and he took me aside and told me, ‘A Lewis never gives up, under any circumstances. You always battle your way out of a predicament like that.’”

Randy paused while telling the story, a serious look on his face. He went on to say, “And I've never given up since. Never. In every workout and in every match, I've always fought for every takedown, and every point. Sure, I've lost takedowns and matches, but I've never given up.”

Anyone who saw Randy Lewis wrestle in high school, in college, or in freestyle competition, all the way up through the world champion-ships and Olympic Games, knows the truth of that statement. He was 89-0 with 83 pins in his last three years in high school, and he went on to win junior national and junior world titles. At the

University of Iowa, he was a crowd-pleasing two-time NCAA champion, always going for the pin.

The pinnacle of his career came in 1984 when he won an Olympic gold medal at 136.5 pounds. In the finals he outscored his opponent from Japan, 24-11.

“I would rather lose 16-14 than win 1-0,” said Lewis. “Wrestling isn’t about stalling and holding back; it’s about going out there, man to man, and seeing who can score the most points. That’s what it’s all about . . . scoring as many points as you can.”

Lewis was the perfect example of an athlete with an aggressive mind-set. That mind-set made him a big crowd favorite during his days as a Hawkeyes star.

“I loved to wrestle in front of those huge crowds. That really turned me on,” said Lewis, flashing a big grin. “I wanted to go out there and entertain the fans by scoring as many points as I could, and more than the other guy could.”

Many of the most successful stars in sport, from Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Leonard in boxing to Curt Schilling in major league baseball, expressed the same attitude. “The bigger the game, the better,” said Schilling. “I’m an adrenaline junkie. I feed off big crowds and noise.”

Wrestlers come in many different personality types. Lewis and Wade Schalles epitomized the colorful style of going for broke. Lee Kemp and Chris Bono liked to control the tempo of the match and keep the score close all the way, staying in control of their opponents and winning with a carefully executed plan.

Some of the greatest champions are by nature combat oriented, so it is no surprise to find them performing at a high level every time they step on a mat. For them, aggressiveness is part of their genetic makeup or their environment acting on them. For others, being aggressive is a learned trait.

“I realized if I was going to achieve anything in life I had to be aggressive,” said Michael Jordan. “I had to get out there and go for it. I don’t believe you can achieve anything by being passive” (Jordan 1998, 9).

No athletes personified that in the world of wrestling more than the Brands twins, Tom and Terry. “They went all out, all the time, every match,” said Lewis, shaking his head in appreciation. “I never saw the Brands boys back off, in practice or in a match. Never! That’s impossible to believe for some people, but it’s true.”

“As I look back on their intensity, I’m amazed by it,” said Gable one day while reflecting on his great stars of the past. “The Brands boys gave it their all, all the time, every time. It’s amazing to think back on how intense they were, it really is.”

At Iowa, Tom and Terry flourished under the austere philosophy. They asked no quarter and they gave none. Tom won three Big Ten titles and three NCAA titles in his four seasons, compiling a record of 158-7-2. Terry was 137-7, with three Big Ten titles and two NCAA titles. Terry also captured two world championships (in 1993 and 1995) and earned a bronze medal in the 2000 Olympics. Tom won one world title (also in 1993) and an Olympic gold medal in 1996.

At a coaches clinic in Newton, Iowa, in the spring of 2004, Tom started his session on aggressive wrestling with

the following words: “The no. 1 ingredient in aggressive wrestling is, without a doubt, *attitude*. It’s your job as coaches to spell it out for them--sometimes with a pat on the back and sometimes with a kick in the butt.

“When I came into the room, I tried to win the practice . . . *not* the scoreboard. That’s a mistake many wrestlers make, trying to win the scoreboard. They get a takedown then shut down, trying to shut the other guy out. My attitude was, ‘I’m gonna beat this guy so bad he’ll want to quit.’ I want to win the entire practice, every minute of it.

“That might sound arrogant, but it’s not! If I wrestle that way, I’ll get better--and so will the guy I’m practicing with. He has to! What we are teaching is good, hard-nosed, tough and exciting wrestling.”

He paused and looked around at the 200 assembled coaches, all hanging on every word he said. “Do you know how good I feel when I wrestle hard for seven minutes and the other guy breaks? We’ve had lots of wrestlers who made good wrestlers break. Mark Ironside, Doug Schwab, Cliff Moore . . . they’ve all made great wrestlers break. It’s part of what makes Iowa so tough!”

Ironside won two NCAA titles at 134 pounds and in 1998 won the Dan Hodge Trophy as the best collegiate wrestler in the nation that season. Schwab was NCAA champion at 141 pounds in 1999, and Moore won the NCAA title at 141 pounds in 2004. All employed the same style--pressure, pressure, pressure, every second of every match. They were not the most skilled wrestlers, but they were the most unrelenting, cut from the same mold as Terry and Tom Brands, never giving their opponent a second’s respite.

That style of wrestling, however, demands a tremendous amount from an athlete, both physically and emotionally. Few athletes can pour that much intensity into a match and keep it up.

“What works for the person you’re imitating may not work for you,” said Jimmy Connors, one of the greatest tennis players of all time. Connors was known for his fiery approach to the game and his extremely high output of emotional energy. “And it’s impossible to play at a feverish emotional peak for long. . . . Your body would use up far too much energy to keep you at that high level” (Clarkson 1999, 24).

Of course, maintaining an emotional peak is much more difficult in a tennis match, which can last several hours, than it is in a wrestling match, which usually lasts six or seven minutes. But wrestling in a tournament, which can take place over three days and involve six or seven matches, can severely tax the emotional system if the mind is not trained for it.

Kim Wood has spent much of his adult life studying what makes athletes tough and exploring the attacking mind-set. The latter is a subject close to his heart. A standout high school football player and wrestler in Barrington, Illinois, Wood earned a football scholarship to the University of Wisconsin. As a Badger, he developed his mind and body into a physical machine. Although a severe knee injury kept him out of pro football, his passion for weight training led to a career. He spent 18 years as strength trainer for the Cincinnati Bengals of the NFL, where he observed aggressive men every Sunday during the fall.

“My passions are combat sports, and football and wrestling are at the top of the list,” said Wood, who has studied all forms of wrestling, from high school to college to the pro ranks in the early days, as few others ever have. “I have seen some very, very tough and aggressive men, and Tim Krumrie is at the top of that list.”

Another football player he greatly respects is Phil Peterson, the older brother of Olympic champions Ben and John Peterson. Both Ben and John have said that Phil was their early inspiration in athletics, and Wood fully understands why that would be the case. Phil set a tremendous example in wrestling tough.

“Phil and I were both fullbacks on the Wisconsin freshman team, in 1963, and then he was moved to the offensive line,” said Wood. “He was a tough, tough farm kid, from a small community in Wisconsin. He must have learned some of the toughness from his environment, but he had it in his genes, too.

“I remember in one practice that he hurt his arm real bad and showed it to the trainer. The trainer was from the old school and just kind of scoffed and told Phil he wasn’t tough enough. Phil walked back to the huddle and kept playing. I saw when he put his hand down that the arm would bend one way, then the other. He played the entire practice, and afterwards they discovered he had cleanly broken two bones in his arm. The forearm was just flopping around.

“That was an awesome display of mental toughness. To this day, it is one of the most amazing things I ever saw.”

Wood said that all the Petersons were cut from the same mold, with a tremendous capacity for hard work and an amazing tolerance for pain. And they had a love of wrestling, tough and hard.

“We used to go into the wrestling room and work out all the time,” said Wood. “We would wrestle each other, or the guys on the varsity. We just loved the toughness that wrestling demanded.

“We also learned that it was the aggressive wrestlers who scored the most and won the most. Wrestling is a sport that pulls the aggressiveness out of you.”

Another Wisconsin football player who thrived in the wrestling room was Tim Krumrie, who went on to a long and successful career with the Bengals in the NFL. He is, says Wood, a prototype for the mentally tough athlete, at any level.

“He broke his leg in two places during the Super Bowl game with the San Francisco 49ers,” said Wood. “It was a terrible break, his foot was flopping, and he kept trying to get up, screaming, ‘I gotta get back in the game! I gotta get back in the game!’

“I remember what Paul Brown (legendary head coach of the Cleveland Browns for many years) once said about Krumrie: ‘He’s a man with a fierce heart,’ and that sums it up.

“The thing with Krumrie is that he wrestled in high school and then one year at Wisconsin, when Russ Hellickson was the coach. He went out for wrestling because he liked Hellickson, and because he liked the way the wrestlers trained. Krumrie was one of the few athletes back then at Wisconsin who really lifted weights hard. He focused on football but he liked wrestlers because they were the tough guys.”

The key to the aggressiveness of men like Krumrie, says Wood, is their focus on this attitude: “I’m going to do it, and I’m going to do it *now!*”

“Here’s the thing,” said Wood, choosing his words carefully. “Other people can coach you and make you

tougher, but the key is you saying, 'I'm going to do it for myself.' Some guys just know how to kick into that special gear, and these are the really tough guys, the ones who are ready to perform right *now* . . . and at all other times.

“You have to have the body, of course. The physical training is essential. You can't be Yosemite Sam and go out and win. But, in competitive combat sports, you have to be a little bit of a killer, like Krumrie. Can it be taught? I'm not sure. It can be coached. It can be uncovered.”

That is certainly the key with the aggressive attitude needed in wrestling.

This is an excerpt from [\*Wrestling Tough\*](#).