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A Season on the Mat: Dan Gable and the Pursuit of Perfection

Nolan Zavoral

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At the University of Iowa Hospitals, a striking display case once held the cast-bronze hands of several prominent artists, writers, and physicians affiliated with the university. One pair of hands—reaching up and out, as if to seize their observer—belonged to Danny Mack Gable, the greatest figure in the history of American wrestling. Gable's place in the university's pantheon was earned through his remarkable coaching career; for the past twenty-one years, Dan Gable's Iowa Hawkeyes have dominated wrestling to an extent rarely seen in any sport. In *A Season on the Mat,* award-winning reporter Nolan Zavoral explores Iowa's storied wrestling program and Gable's record of excellence in an unprecedented, intimate look at the man and his methods.

Gable grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, and quickly became a wrestling legend in a place where there was no higher aspiration. He charged through his high school years unbeaten—64-0—and then won 117 straight matches at Iowa State University before losing, in a shocking upset, in the NCAA finals of his senior year. Gable used the memory of that defeat as a spur to greater glory in the 1972 Olympics, when he won the gold medal by winning six matches in which he was not only unbeaten but unscored upon. But as great as his accomplishments were as a wrestler, they pale next to what he has achieved as a coach. In the twenty one years Gable has been head coach, his teams have won the Big 10 title every year and the NCAA championship fifteen times.

As Gable approached the 1996-97 season, he was a mere shell of his usual, vigorous self. A dozen back and knee surgeries had reduced his proud athlete's walk to that of a stooped, shambling old man. He could no longer get down with his wrestlers and demonstrate holds and escapes. But with speculation rife about whether this season would be his last, Gable persevered—despite a midseason hip replacement operation—aiming toward the NCAA championship to be held in Cedar Falls, Iowa, right next door to Waterloo, where Gable had spent his wrestling youth.

A Season on the Mat chronicles this dramatic season, in which Gable led his team—far from his most talented—to the national title. Zavoral takes the reader behind the scenes, into the stifling heat of the wrestling room where young men from places like Rock Falls, Iowa, or Philip, South Dakota, sacrifice everything they have just to be a part of the Hawkeye program. We watch strongwilled athletes like Mike Mena, whose struggle to make weight almost cost him a shot at the national championship; Lincoln McILravy, who overcame persistent severe headaches to win his third national title in his four-year career; and all the other wrestlers who contributed to a record-breaking performance at the NCAAs, scoring the most points in collegiate wrestling history.

But most important, we see the man behind the Gable legend. From his difficult upbringing, interrupted by the tragedy of his sister's brutal murder, through the single defeat that haunts him to this day, to the ups and downs of his phenomenal coaching career, Gable has come to symbolize to many all that is special about this demanding, elemental sport. Part biography, part chronicle, part portrait of this unique subculture, *A Season on the Mat* is the best and most thorough look at one of the most important and most overlooked figures in American athletics.

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