Olympic Wrestler Succumbs to Rare Cancer

Terry McCann: 1932 - 2006

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Terrence J. McCann, an Olympic Gold Medal winner in freestyle wrestling and a leader in the sport of wrestling, died June 7 in his home in Dana Point, California. McCann helped found a new national governing body for the sport, the United States Wrestling Federation (now called USA Wrestling) and is credited with the United States' increasing involvement in the international wrestling scene. He spent four years as president of USA Wrestling and six years on the board of FILA, the international governing body of wrestling. In addition, he served for many years in various capacities on the United States Olympic Committee.

"Terry was a tremendous wrestler as well as a leader within wrestling and the Olympic family," said Jim Scherr, CEO of the U.S. Olympic Committee in Colorado Springs. "His tenure as president (of USA Wrestling) marked a time of significant progress for the sport. He was a well-respected leader within the Olympic family and rose to the top of the USOC. He was noted for his honesty and passion for the National Governing Bodies and the athletes. He hired me to serve as executive director of USA Wrestling in 1990. I am proud to call him a mentor and a friend. I would not have the opportunity to serve in my present capacity were it not for Terry."

It is ironic that the job that funded his dreams of winning a Gold Medal in wrestling is said to have caused his asbestos-related cancer. McCann, of Dana Point, California, won the 1960 Gold Medal after working at an oil refinery in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the late 1950s while training for the Olympics. In April 2005, McCann was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a rare cancer linked to asbestos exposure. Shortly after the diagnosis, he joined a class action lawsuit against asbestos manufacturers and became a spokesman against a proposal before Congress to impose limits on litigation against those companies. He appeared recently in a national television commercial denouncing the proposal.

McCann's legacy in the sport of wrestling almost didn't happen. The day of the 1960 Olympic trials, he nearly missed competing because of illness and a debilitating knee injury. Against all odds, he won the test and went on to score a dramatic Olympic victory in Rome. After his heady accomplishment, McCann said he learned a lesson about success -- "That it is a journey, and that having arrived at a high point guarantees nothing about the rest of the trip."

A fellow Olympic wrestler and coach, Werner Holzer, calls McCann "the greatest of them all."

"During my 50 years in the sport of wrestling, as an athlete, coach and administrator, I have seen all the great wrestlers," Holzer says. "Some of them had great technique, others were incredibly tenacious and had great endurance; some had tremendous strength, still others had catlike speed, agility and balance. Terry had it all; he was the most complete wrestler, the one who excelled the most in every aspect of the sport."

"Although his stature was small, his attitude, confidence, courage and leadership while representing the sport both nationally and internationally was that of a giant," recalls Lee Roy Smith, a 1983 World Silver Medalist who coached for Arizona State University and the U.S. National Freestyle Team and is now executive director of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Oklahoma. "He always felt it was important for anyone involved in the sport to conduct himself in an ethical and sportsmanlike way, yet no one wanted to win more than he did."

McCann took great delight in helping young wrestlers. He was a volunteer coach of Greco-Roman wrestling at the Minnesota Wrestling Club and later of freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling at the Mayor Daley Youth Foundation in Chicago, Illinois, where McCann was born and grew up. Under his direction the Youth Foundation won six consecutive freestyle national championships and five Greco-Roman national championships. He also coached contenders in World, Pan-American and Olympic games, with six of the wrestlers earning top medals.

"We often spoke about training and coaching philosophies and what types of strategies and techniques each of our U.S. wrestlers needed to defeat a particular opponent," says Smith. "The record book shows that during his tenure as president of USA Wrestling and as a member of FILA Bureau, the U.S. Freestyle Team experienced one of its most successful eras in world competition."

Russ Hellickson, a 1976 Olympic Silver Medalist in wrestling, an NBC Olympic wrestling commentator and wrestling coach at Ohio State University since 1986, credits McCann for his success. "My continued involvement in wrestling is a direct result of the encouragements and teachings of Terry McCann," he wrote in a letter supporting McCann's nomination to the Wrestling Hall

of Fame in 1977. "He served as the wrestling coach of the Mayor Daley Youth Foundation during my early years of international competition. Without his urgings and confidence, I am certain that I would not have continued to compete in wrestling."

After his Olympic victory McCann worked for various associations. In 1975 he was named executive director of Toastmasters International, a not-for-profit organization headquartered in Southern California that helps people develop their communication and leadership skills. After retiring in 2001, he served for two years as executive director of the Surf Industry Manufacturers Association (SIMA), the official working trade association of more than 300 surf industry suppliers. An avid surfer, McCann was active in Surfrider Foundation, an environmental group, serving as the Foundation's president from 1993 to 1997.

McCann is survived by his wife of 52 years, Lucille; seven children; 18 grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; a brother and two sisters.

Photos available upon request.

SOURCE: Toastmasters International on behalf of the McCann family

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