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Aged To Perfection

Veteran Men's Freestylers Earn Spots on World Team with Family's Blessings

By Mike Finn, W.I.N. Editor

Sweat was pouring from his 265-pound body and he had a hard time catching his breath from the exhaustion of wrestling six hard minutes against perhaps the toughest young heavyweight in this country.

But the 32-year-old Tolly Thompson had no problem smiling. All he had to do from the floor of Iowa State's Hilton Coliseum was look up into the nearby stands at three women smiling even more than this 2005 World Team Trials champion. For Thompson knew this feminine trio — made up of his wife, Tracy, and their daughters, Payton, 6, and Bree, 3 — were three reasons why he put his mind and body through so much pain at a time most of his peers had retired from the mat.

"I've been overseas away from my family and my kids half the winter," recalled Thompson after he defeated Oklahoma State's two-time NCAA champion Steve Mocco in a pair of matches at the recent World Team Trials in Ames, Iowa.

Ironically, this central Iowa town was where Thompson was born in June 25, 1973, but his life has been a whirl-wind since he first stepped on the mat; taking him to the University of Nebraska, where he won an NCAA championship in 1995 and earned two other All-American honors and later to winning gold medals at the 1998 and 2002 Pan American championships. But there was also something missing on his resume: a shot at a world championship. That nearly happened in 1998 when Thompson won his first U.S. Nationals championship and was the man to beat at the World Team Trials that year. But Thompson spent that day having surgery and was unable to compete.

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Thompson's absence also opened the door for Kerry McCoy and Stephen Neal, who owned the top spot at heavyweight for the next seven years while Thompson labored in anonymity while serving as an assistant coach at the University of Northern Iowa.

Yet, Thompson persevered and has reaped the rewards the last two months; first at the U.S. Nationals, where he pinned Mocco for his second national title in late April, and at the World Team Trials, where added two more wins against college wrestling's most heralded performer who also won the coveted Dan Hodge Trophy.

"It's been a quest," admitted Thompson. "It's not always about winning. It's a process to how you do it. I've learned a ton on the process the last seven or eight years." So too have Sammie Henson and Chris Bono, who like Thompson, performed well beyond their years and also captured spots on the 2005 U.S. world team on an appropriate Sunday in June: Father's Day.

"Waking up and seeing my babies in the morning motivates me," said Bono, 30, who first thought of his wife, Niki, and daughters, Josie and Ellie, after he defeated Jared Lawrence in a pair of Championship Series matches at 145.5 pounds. "I have to win for them. Dad's not home a lot when he's training. I want my girls to be proud of me."

Henson felt the same way about his three children and even spent time with them in his hotel room prior to his Trials championship match with Eric Akin.

"I had all three of them in there and they were screaming and we were changing diapers; things like that," said Henson, who with his wife, Stephanie, are raising Jackson 5, Wyatt 2 and Ruby, 1, in their home in St. Louis. "It takes my mind off wrestling, which I really enjoy." Henson said he never would have included his family in his wrestling career back in 1998 when he won a world championship or in 2000 when he settled for a silver medal at the Sydney Olympics.

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But putting wrestling in perspective has also put a new lease of life on Henson, who said he felt like he was 22 years old after defeating Akin — who like Henson is actually 34 — in two matches at the Trials.

“Losing (the gold medal) in 2000, I think I realized it’s just a sport,” said Henson, who actually won a U.S. national championship in Greco-Roman in 1990 before switching to freestyle after first winning two NCAA championships at Clemson (1993-94) . I thought my world was going to come to an end and it didn’t. When you lose, it really changes your perspective on life.”

“I’m more in love with wrestling,” said Bono. “For someone like me, I live and breathe it. I know a lot of guys that I train with get mad at me. They don’t want to do the things that I want to do.”

“I’m a maniac when it comes to this sport. I’m just thankful that my wife supports me because it’s not fair. I need to get my goals done and take care of my family. This sport has done everything for me.”

This trio’s love for the sport was a big reason for them competing in a non-Olympic year. It will also have a lot to do with how much longer they wish to compete ... including three years from now when the 2008 Olympics will be held in China.

“It is a year by year thing, but the more you win, it’s easier to stay around,” said Bono. “But for me, the more I’ve lost, it’s been easier to stay around. I’m a lifer.”

“If I start thinking (about the future), I’ll quit tomorrow,” said Henson. “I did that before 2000; I kept coming back because I knew how much it takes to get there. I take this one day at a time.” For these wrestlers and daddies, their future is now.

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