

TheMatside View, by Gary Abbott – Taking pride in being a wrestler

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Gary Abbott/USA Wrestling

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Wrestlers are unique and special people, and the wrestling community is often described as a family. There is something about the sport, which requires tremendous commitment and effort, that makes wrestlers a different breed.

How many times have you seen wrestlers who battled intensely during their careers become friends later on off the mats? This happens often, because of the respect between athletic rivals and the camaraderie that comes from hard, honest competition.

Often, wrestlers are either ignored or ridiculed by the general public for a variety of reasons. Those that do not respect wrestling often do not get it, because they have not been exposed to the things that make wrestling great.

Sometimes, wrestlers need to step back and take pride in their sport and their involvement. One of the best reminders of this for me was meeting all of the former wrestlers who have gone on to achieve great things in other aspects of society.

According to Myron Roderick, President of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, one of the most popular areas of the museum is where the Outstanding Americans are housed. This is where all of the great American citizens who had wrestling roots are honored for achievements off the mat.

These honorees include Presidents, champions of industry, political leaders, astronauts, actors, authors, Nobel Prize scientists and other amazing people from all walks of life. These are the people who took the lessons learned from wrestling, and put them to work in the world.

There was a very special evening during the World Championships of Freestyle Wrestling in New York City entitled "A Night of Legends." It was held at the prestigious New York Athletic Club, and a few hundred of the sport's most prominent and successful people were there.

The former wrestlers who were honored were on the who's-who list of society leaders: Speaker of the House J. Dennis Hastert, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the President's Chief Economic Advisor Stephen Friedman, Academy Award winning author and playwright John Irving, Nobel Peace Prize winning agronomist Norman Borlaug, and Samsung Chairman Kun-Hee Lee.

Talk about a head table!!!!

Also there to share support was actor Billy Baldwin. In addition, over 30 past U.S. Olympic and World Champion wrestlers were invited and honored. It was an amazing mix of famous and powerful people, wrestlers all.

Each and every one of the honored leaders seemed to truly enjoy the experience. Guests in the audience took pictures with each of the celebrities, something to bring back home and remind them of the special evening.

In addition, those featured guests, who rub elbows with the powerful and famous on a daily basis, really

cherished getting to meet the great wrestling champions who were there with them. It was a tremendous opportunity for the sport, as our greatest former wrestlers-turned-leaders mingled with our greatest competitive wrestling stars.

What everybody at the dinner shared was a pride in being involved in wrestling. Everybody felt good about being a wrestler, and were able to share their experiences about what made the sport so meaningful to them.

Another incident happened at the U.S. Olympic Training Center a few weeks later that once again brought great pride to the wrestling community.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was in Colorado Springs for important NATO military meetings. However, before he got involved with the important matters of international relations, Rumsfeld took time from his schedule to attend a Team USA wrestling practice.

The visit ended up not being very long, but it was rewarding, both for Rumsfeld himself and the men and women athletes who were training there that day. Rumsfeld arrived with a large group of military brass and came in the wrestling room to watch.

He visited with USA Wrestling Executive Director Rich Bender and the USOC's top executive Jim Scherr, talking exclusively about wrestling. He also spoke with some of the wrestlers who were preparing for the women's team workout.

Coach Kevin Jackson stopped his freestyle practice and brought the team over to meet Rumsfeld. He agreed to pose for pictures with the team. He accepted a Princeton wrestling sweatshirt from wrestler Juan Venturi, who like Rumsfeld wrestled at Princeton. He spent some time meeting all of the military wrestlers who were at practice, and posed for a picture with them.

Rumsfeld had a great time. In addition, all of the athletes and coaches in the room were excited to meet with Rumsfeld, and talk a little wrestling.

This day in USA Wrestling's workout room was another instance where wrestlers celebrated their sport, and where everybody took great pride in being wrestlers.

Sometimes there are things within wrestling that can bring people down, especially with dropped college programs. Too often, these negative things can hinder the sport from being a celebration.

Wrestling is a great sport. Take great pride in being a wrestler. Donald Rumsfeld does. So does Dennis Hastert. So do John Irving, Stephen Friedman and Dr. Norman Bourlag. Ditto for Billy Baldwin. These great leaders take pride in wrestling; shouldn't we also?