

# 50 Years of Nelson Fieldhouse

Robert Dunkelberger, 2005H and Ed Coar, 1978



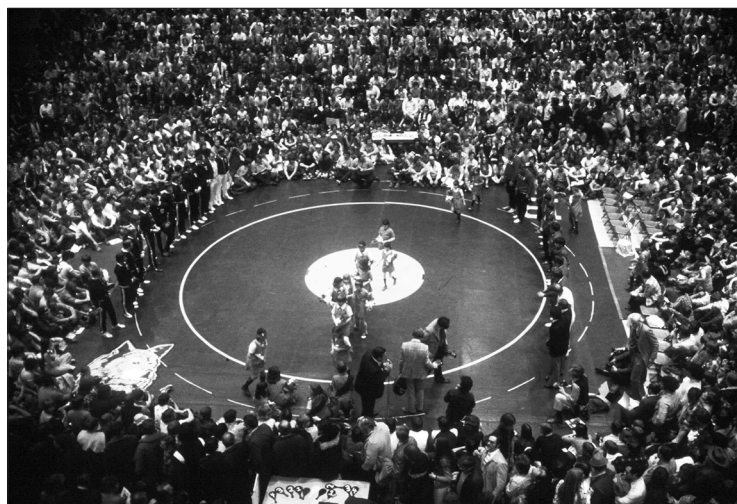
Throughout the 2022-23 basketball season, program inserts for each conference game will mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the E. H. Nelson Fieldhouse. These inserts will feature various aspects of the histories of the five longest running sports housed by the fieldhouse: men's and women's basketball, men's and women's swimming, and wrestling. This installment features three international exhibitions of wrestling, brought to Nelson from Poland, the Soviet Union, and Japan between 1974 and 1983.

**F**rom the time varsity athletic events were first held in Nelson Fieldhouse in December 1972, wrestling has been one of the featured attractions. Standout wrestlers such as national champions Shorty Hitchcock and Ricky Bonomo put on dominant exhibitions on their way to their titles. But collegiate wrestlers weren't the only ones to demonstrate their skills at Nelson. Over the span of a decade, the fieldhouse hosted three international wrestling events.

The first took place in Nelson on April 4, 1974, with the Polish National Olympic Wrestling Team. Former Bloomsburg wrestling coach Russ Houk, professor in the Physical Education Department and Chairman of the United States Olympic Wrestling Committee, coordinated the meet. Prior to the match in Bloomsburg, the Polish team had participated in meets in Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio and was ranked second in the world to the Soviet Union. It was Greco-Roman style wrestling, different from the style common in American high schools and colleges in that a wrestler could not use his legs to bring down an opponent, only his upper body.

The team representing the United States was composed of champion wrestlers from Pennsylvania. They included Wade Schalles, a two-time NCAA Division I champion from Clarion; Rob Weller, Slippery Rock; Tom Herr, Edinboro; Mike Lieberman, Lehigh; and Paul Gillespie, West Chester. Bloomsburg wrestlers competing were All-Americans Randy Watts at 149 pounds, Ron Sheehan at 180, and John Hohmann at 198.

The Polish team arrived in Bloomsburg the day before the match and enjoyed a luncheon at the Scranton Commons. On Thursday the 4th, the team toured campus before the competition that evening. A formal ceremony was held before the meet as the visiting athletes, following the two national anthems, were presented with bouquets of flowers by members of a brownie troop. While



*A packed fieldhouse watches members of a local brownie troop leave the mat before the USA-Soviet meet, April 9, 1975*

none of the Bloomsburg wrestlers won their matches, Schalles, in the 163-pound class, surprised his opponent with a 14-9 decision. That gave the Polish team, which won the match 18-2, its first individual defeat during their tour of the United States.

A year later on April 9, 1975, it was the Soviet National Freestyle Wrestling Team against a team of United States all-stars. For the second time Houk, who felt this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the area, was instrumental in bringing international athletics to Nelson. The Soviet team, which boasted four world champion wrestlers, during their tour of the country that year had won the World Cup title in Toledo, Ohio, and defeated all-star teams in Chicago and Jacksonville.

The United States all-stars were coached by University of Iowa assistant and 1972 Olympic gold medal winner Dan Gable and consisted of wrestlers associated with colleges and teams from around the country. They included Russ Hellickson, who had won a gold medal at the 1972 Pan American Games, and John Peterson, a 1972 Olympic silver medalist.

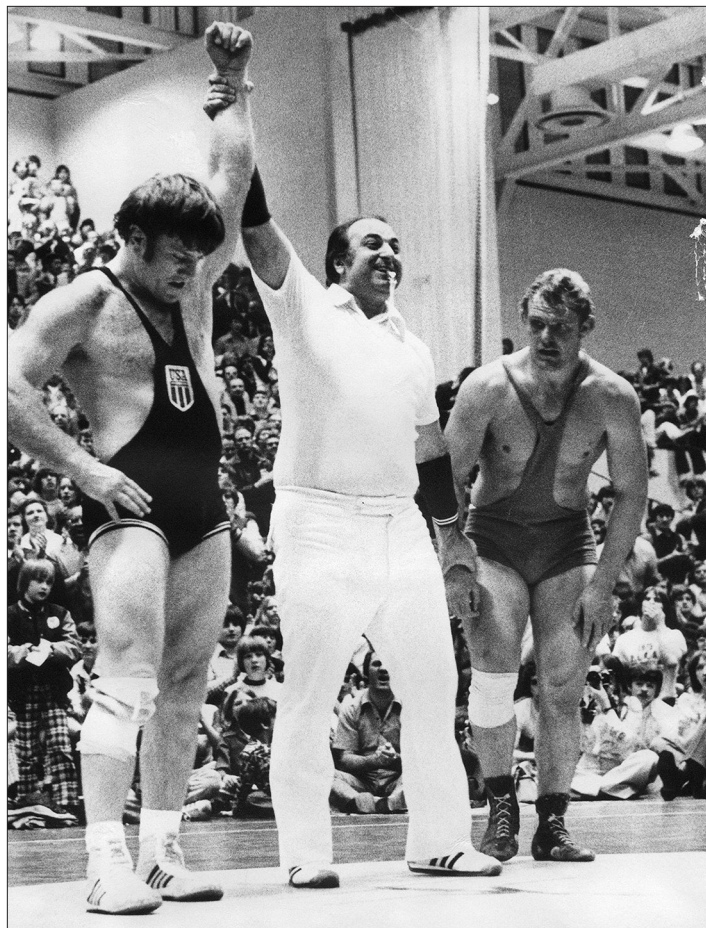


Brownies again presented flowers to the wrestlers before a meet witnessed by an overflow crowd estimated at more than 4,000. This time the United States all-stars came through with two victories, although the Soviets won the meet 16-4. Doug Moses, a former NAIA champion from the University of Iowa, won by a 3-2 score at 136.5 pounds, and at 198 pounds Russ Hellickson won 5-1. Concerning the meet, the student newspaper, the *Campus Voice*, wrote "... BSC hosted what possibly could be called the most prestigious event in the college's history."

The third international wrestling event was not an actual meet but a teaching experience. The visitors were the Japanese National Wrestling Team, who at the end of March 1983, during a two-week tour of the country, held a clinic for the Bloomsburg Wrestling Club. The intent was for young wrestlers in the area to learn techniques and advance the sport of wrestling.

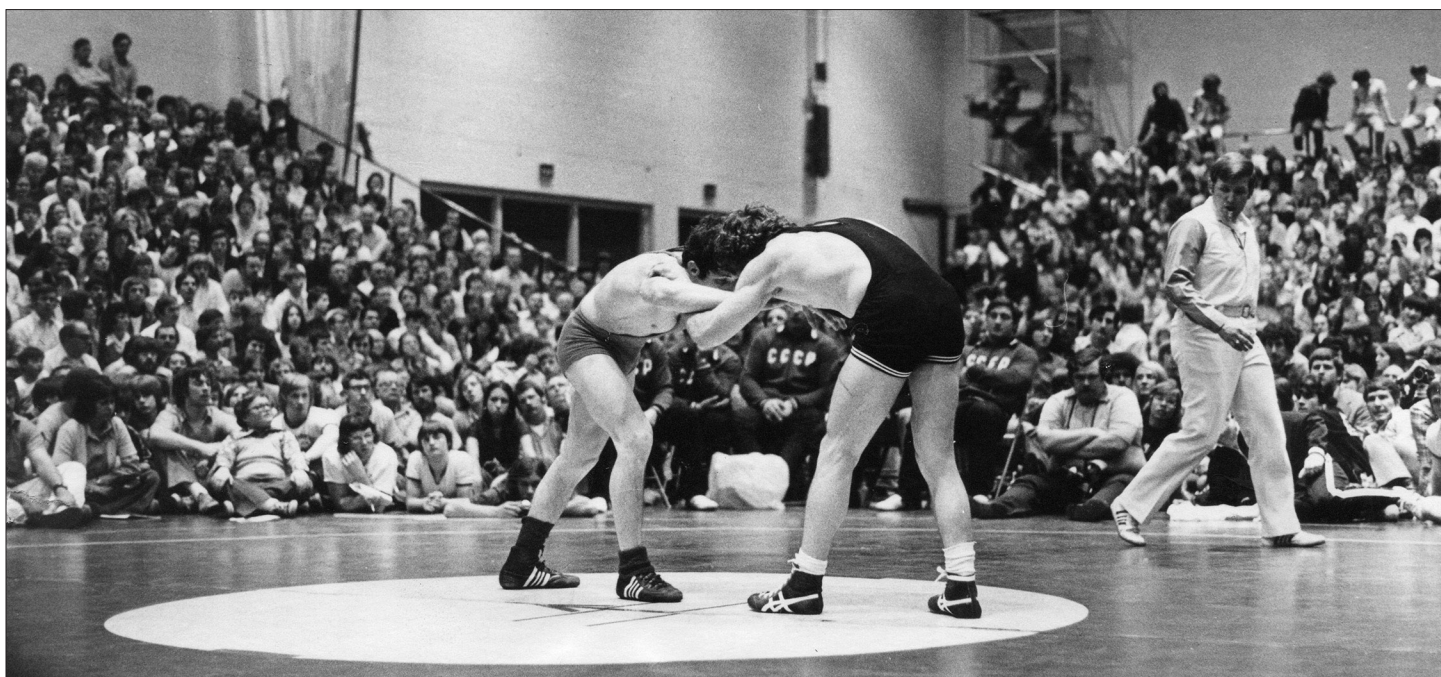
Of the ten team members, six were students, three teachers, and one was in the army. Their coach expected five of the wrestlers to participate the following year in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. During their three-day stay in Bloomsburg, the Japanese wrestlers and coaches were guests of local area families.

A demonstration and workout was held on the evening of March 30 (with a practice session the following day) in Nelson's wrestling room. It was filled with around 50 energetic young wrestlers, who ranged from elementary-age to college. Two from local area schools who participated included a two-time PIAA Class AA Champion, Danville's Jim Martin, along with Doug McCormick of Bloomsburg, son of college president James McCormick.



*A joyous official raises Russ Hellickson's arm after his victory over a Soviet wrestler*

For one decade, some of the best wrestlers in the world came to Bloomsburg to demonstrate their skills. It was further evidence of what Nelson Fieldhouse has meant to Bloomsburg University for the past 50 years.



*Soviet and United States wrestlers meet on the mat at the center of Nelson Fieldhouse, April 9, 1975*