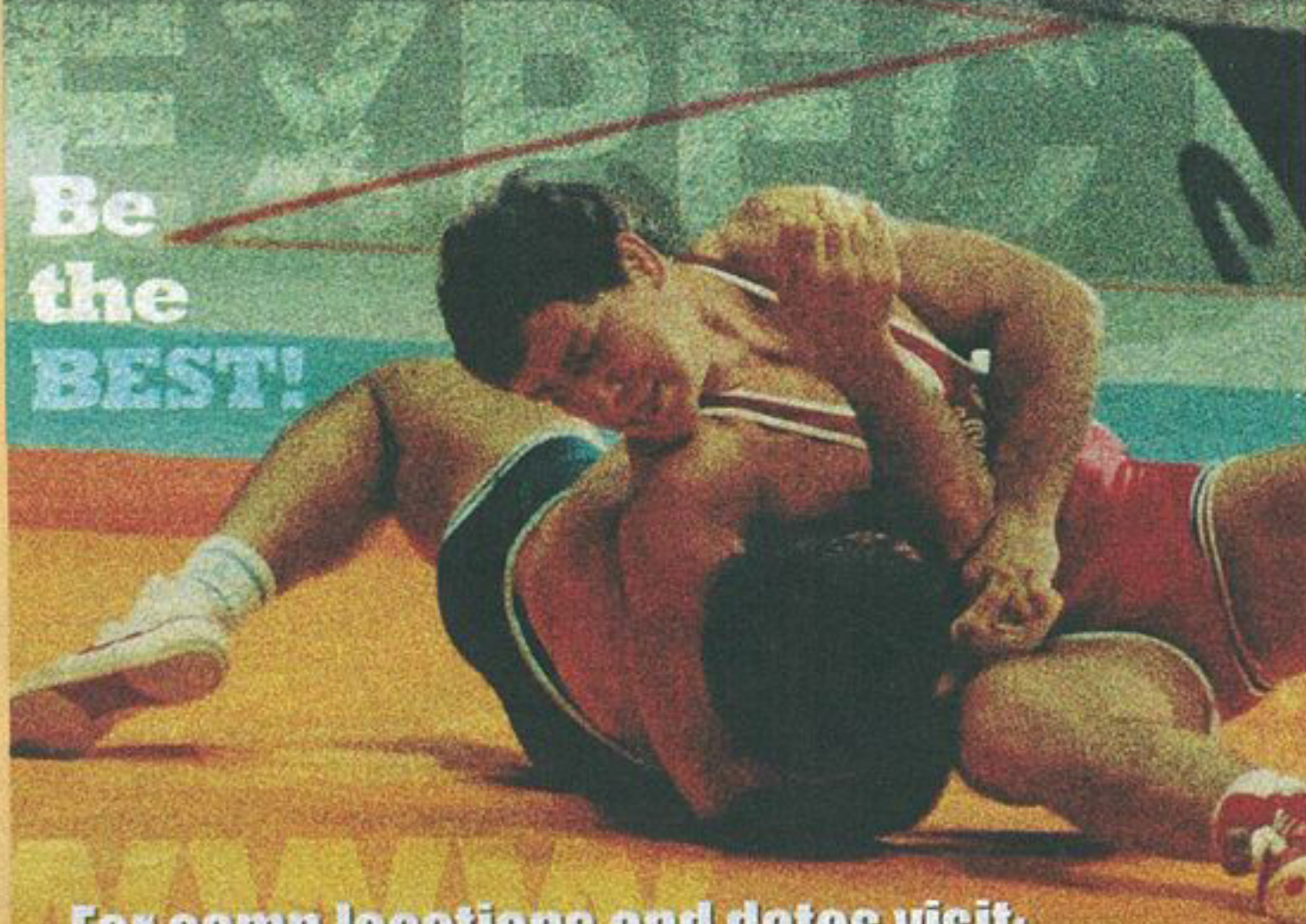


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Director, US Camps  
Olympic Champion  
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# Clayton: before starting, deal with kids' expectations

If you are a parent or young coach of a young wrestler, you might have some questions about how hard to push your child/athlete to compete in this wonderful character-building sport we call wrestling. This great sport of ours is one of the very best when it comes to building strong mental, physical and emotional skills in the young athletes who decide to join the sport.

Wrestling builds discipline and teaches our youth to work hard. The sport teaches skills in the area of self-sacrifice and focus. It strengthens determination and goal setting practices. Wrestling develops a humble confidence that will contribute to overall life success. No doubt about it, the grueling sport of wrestling can build such great fortitude in our young athletes. Fortitude that will last an entire lifetime!

The goal is to create an approach that motivates our youngsters to enjoy the sport and continue to wrestle for many years. This will allow for all of the wonderful learning to take place. Please remember, the child's win/loss record really means very little at the younger ages. I could cite bundles of Olympic superstars that had big-time losing records as youngsters.

As a parent/coach of a young wrestler, when and how hard should we push our child/athlete?

My associate and good friend Mike Clayton, manager of the National Coaches Education Program for USA Wrestling, says it best in his words that follow:

*"In my role, I often get phone calls and emails from parents whose athletes seem to be facing burn out. All too often, the age of these kids is 12 and under.*

*"The common denominator is that the children on the mat feel too much pressure from the parents and/or coaches. This isn't always because the parent or coach is putting pressure on the child, but regardless the child does feel pressure of some sort to perform in order to make the parents and/or coach happy.*

*"If kids are feeling pressure that we aren't even placing on them, how do we help fix the problem?*

*"If your child is under the age of eight (or is starting wrestling for the first time), ask them what would make them quit the sport ... long before they have their first competition. Why, you may be thinking? Because it helps take emotions out of the decision. It shows the child there is a way out of the sport, but it reinforces that we need to be mentally and physically tough to a certain point. If we reach that point and go beyond, we do not have to continue with this particular venture.*

*"Now the child will be able to perform*

## Coach's Perspective



Steve Fraser

*at their best, knowing they have expectations to try hard, learn, listen, behave, set goals, sacrifice...but no pressure to stay in a sport that perhaps their parents or coaches love more than they do.*

*"Which brings us to a difficult discussion with parents and coaches. What are your goals for allowing your child to participate in the sport of wrestling?*

*"Once you establish your expectations for participation in wrestling, ask yourself if those expectations are reasonable to communicate to a child under the age of 12.*

*"Does an eight-year old child need to be worried about a college scholarship? It may sound funny to read it, but many parents tell kids that 'This is the only way you can go to college.' And even if that statement is true, to burden a child with that pressure certainly does not help the youngster perform to their best.*

*"The weight of a comment like that on a child's shoulders would be like an adult being forced to carry a bull around on their back every day (that reference is for you Milon of Croton fans — famous Olympic wrestler who trained by carrying a calf daily as it grew into a bull).*

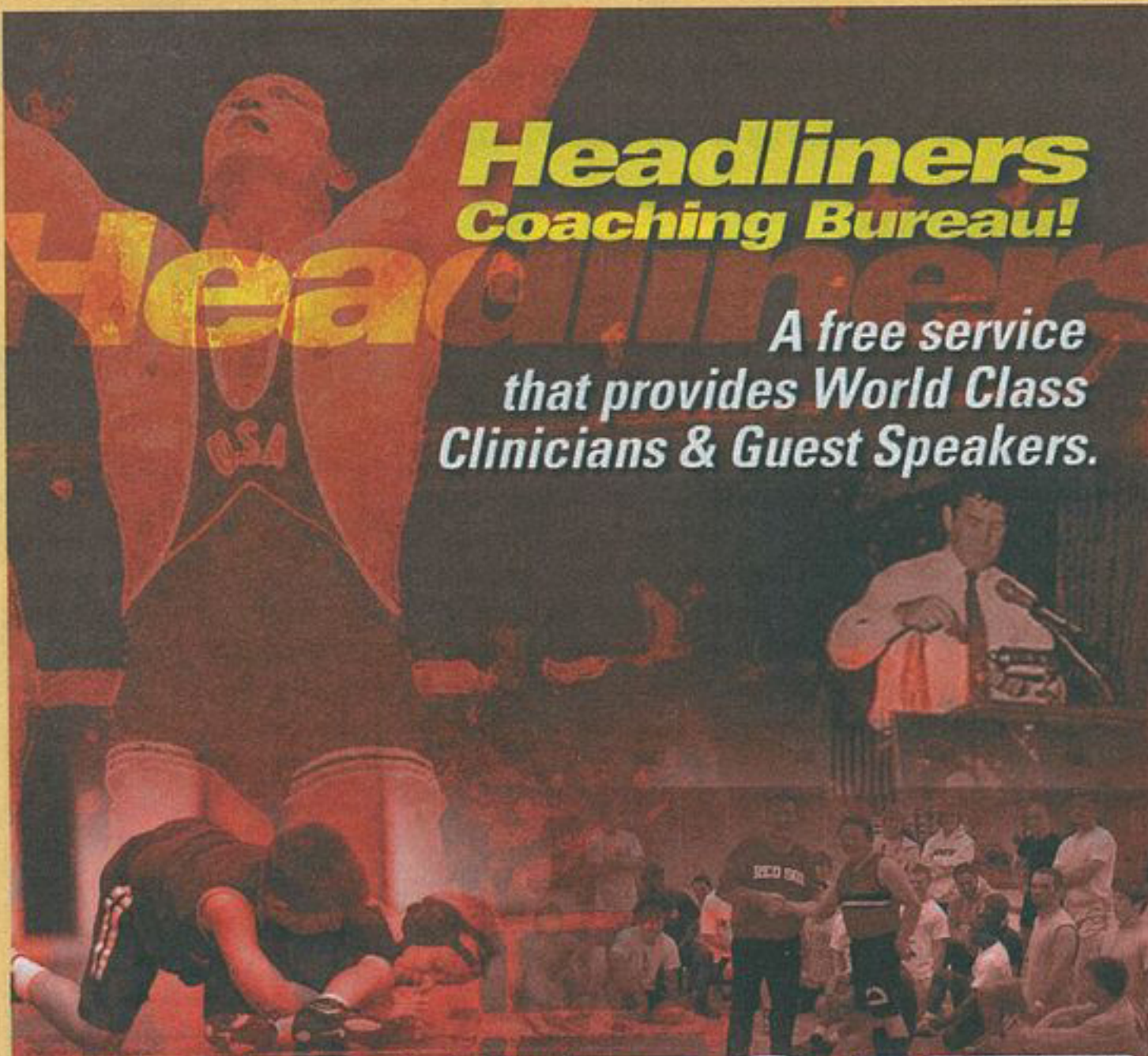
*"Our jobs as parents and coaches are to ensure our kids have a safe and rewarding sports experience first and foremost. This includes emotional stability as well as physical literacy and mental toughness."*

I think Mike Clayton's message can really help when it comes to focusing on the most important aspects of youth wrestling.

Who really knows how far a young wrestler can go in the sport. The real thing to remember is, "Life is hard! The great sport of wrestling will prepare our youth for the challenge. Let's help raise America's greatest generation!" ■

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