

# A reversal of fortune

Born deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology's Matt Hamill was a problem child until he discovered wrestling. Now, he is one of the nation's best collegiate wrestlers.

By JIM MANDELARO  
STAFF WRITER

Matt Hamill entered the world on Oct. 5, 1976. There were no complications during delivery, and he weighed in at a healthy 8 pounds, 1 ounce.

But he was born deaf.

"It came as a complete surprise," says his mother, Janet Rich. "It was just God's way."

For a long time, Matt refused to accept God's way. He would set goals for himself, vowing to hear by the time he was 8, or 10, or 12.

These were goals for which he had no control, and he was crushed each time they weren't met.

Wrestling saved him.

"It means everything to me," Hamill says. "It's a huge part of my life."

Hamill is 20 now, and one of the top college wrestlers in the nation. The Rochester Institute of Technology sophomore is 23-0, has yet to be taken down and has never trailed in a match. He is ranked No. 1 in Division III at 167 pounds.

Hamill has new goals now, involving a college degree and an Olympic berth. Goals which, like so many of his opponents, can be pinned down.

## Mischievous Matt

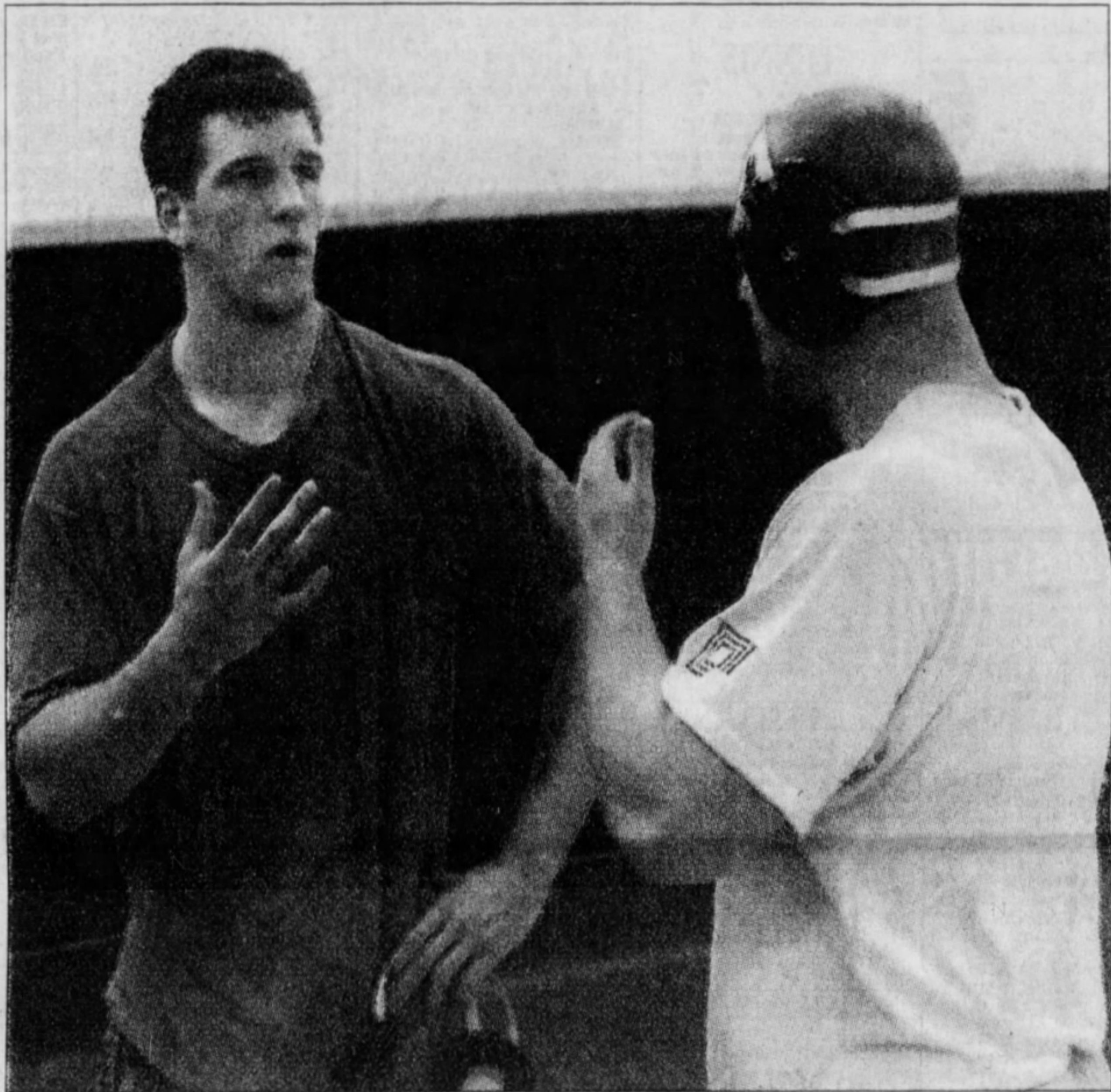
Growing up in Loveland, Ohio, just outside of Cincinnati, Hamill was constantly getting into trouble.

"He was," his mother says, "a holy terror."

Matt would run away at night, searching for adventure. He walked along highways and across truss bridges, climbed the tallest trees he could find. Fascinated by technology, he took apart computers, VCRs and televisions in the house.

Hamill is completely deaf when he's not wearing his hearing aid and can hear only certain vowel sounds at distinct pitches with the aid.

He learned to read lips at the Cincinnati Speech and Hearing Center when he was 18 months old, a skill that didn't do much good when his frantic parents were call-



MELISSA MAHAN staff photographer

**Talking it over** Matt Hamill, left, a deaf wrestler at RIT, signs with his best friend, Jay Jakubowski, who is also deaf and on the wrestling team. Hamill, 20, is ranked No. 1 in Div. III at 167 pounds.

ing his name in the night.

That's where wrestling came in. Hamill's stepfather, Mike Rich, is the wrestling coach at Loveland High. Seeking a way to keep their curious son busy, the Riches started bringing him to matches when he was 6. He sat next to Mike on the bench and soon began copying the big kids by tumbling around the house.

The tactic worked. Matt, a middle child, was fascinated by

wrestling.

"I loved it," he says. "It was different, exciting."

Janet Rich says wrestling changed her son's life.

"It gave him a purpose," she says. "It gave him a social life."

Before he found wrestling, Hamill wouldn't go with his friends to the mall, telling Janet "I can't hear them, and they walk ahead of me."

He wouldn't go to the movies, be-

cause they didn't have closed-captioning. So he stayed home with Janet and watched television.

Wrestling got him out of the house. It was his escape.

"I'd be sitting in the stands and see him talking with another wrestler," says Janet, a physical education teacher at Loveland High. "I'd ask him afterward, 'What was that

# Wrestler

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about?" And he'd say, 'I don't know, mom. I'm deaf.' But he kept talking anyway."

## Goodbye Purdue, hello RIT

Wrestling built Hamill's self-esteem. Before junior high, he had trouble accepting that his dream of one day hearing would not happen.

"Wrestling helped him grasp that he has a handicap but can still achieve something," his mother says. "He can do things that even people who hear can't do."

Hamill eventually wrestled for his stepfather at Loveland High, going 40-1 and finishing third in the Ohio State Championship his senior year. He also trained with Doug Blubaugh, a 1960 Olympic gold medalist, at Blubaugh's camp in Bloomington, Ind.

Hamill didn't have the money to pay for the prestigious camp, so he bartered with the Olympian. In return for free admission, Hamill picked up the leaves in and around the pond — scumming the bottom of the pond while in a rowboat.

"I didn't mind," he says. "I wanted to go to his camp."

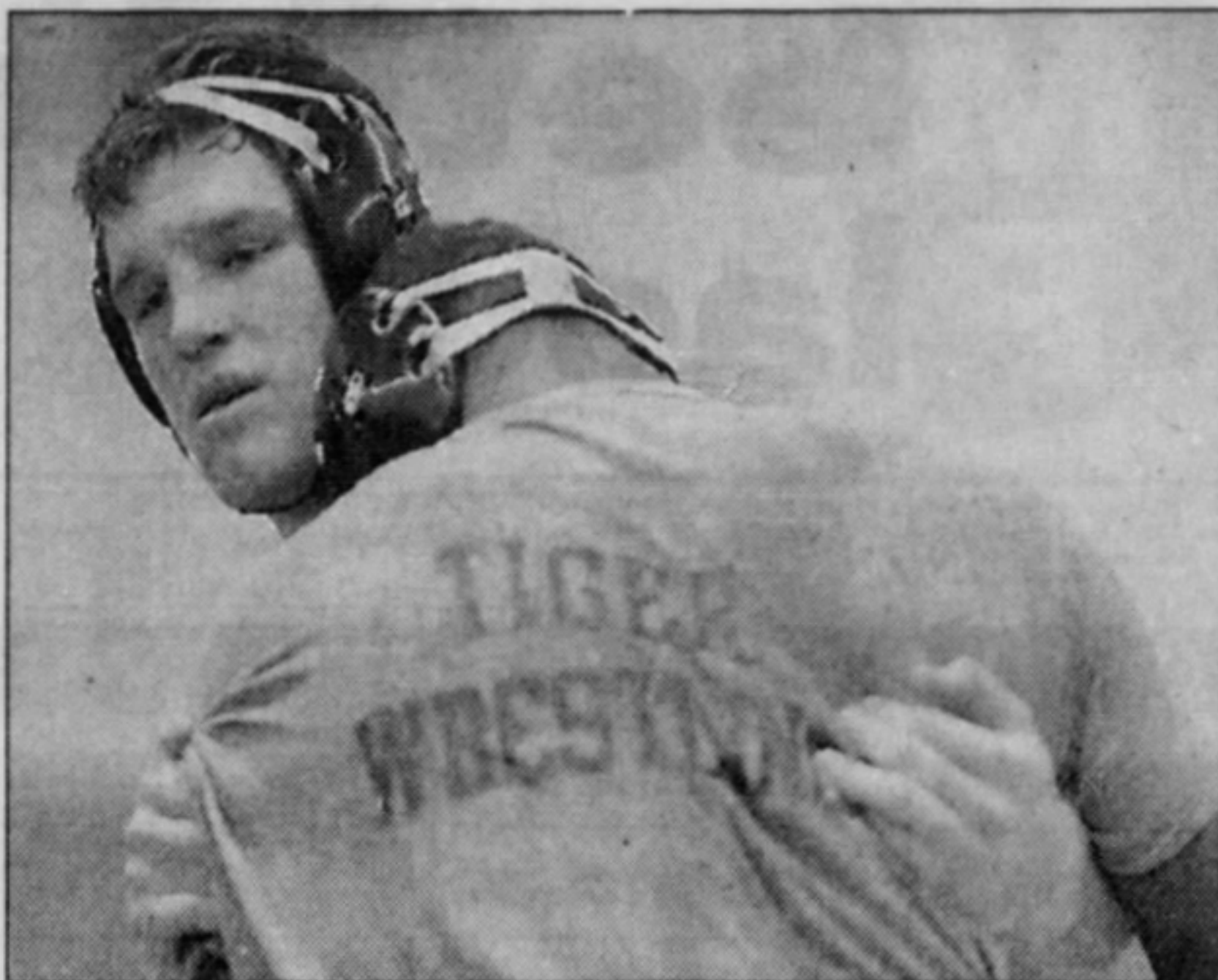
Hamill earned a full ride to Division I Purdue University last year, but it soon became apparent that West Lafayette, Ind., wasn't the place for him.

Often, he would endure a four-hour lab in his major — electrical engineering technology — and then spend another three hours practicing with the wrestling team. His interpreter was based in Chicago and wouldn't make the trip if the weather was bad, leaving Hamill cut off from the others.

Worse, a tug of war developed. Hamill's academic advisers suggested he quit wrestling; his wrestling coaches told him to change majors.

"I liked Purdue, but I did not like the way things were going there," says Hamill, who went 13-23 for the Boilermakers. "Now I'm happy."

Hamill has several hearing-impaired friends at RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf. His best friend is Jay Jakubowski, a deaf wrestler who is sidelined by a



MELISSA MAHAN staff photographer

## Turnaround RIT standout Matt Hamill credits wrestling with changing his perspective on life.

knee injury.

"Now Matt has a smile on his face 90 percent of the time," says Tigers fourth-year coach Ron Gross, who took over the team following Earl Fuller's retirement after 46 years. "The kids love him."

Gross says Hamill is "like a butterfly" when he's not wrestling. Once the whistle blows, however, he's all business.

"He's very hard-nosed, very aggressive," Gross says. "He's a little mean. He's not dirty by any means, but I've had many wrestlers come up to me afterward and say how sore they are."

Hamill has two signers who alternate — Ruban Mallory and Maureen Barry — but since he has an opponent lunging at him throughout a match, he can only look toward the sidelines during breaks in the action.

Other than that, he's on his own. When Hamill wrestles, Gross stops yelling and his teammates stop cheering.

"You don't hear a lot of stuff from our corner," Gross says, "because it's not going to do any good. He can't hear us."

Nor can he hear the referee's whistle, which is why the official will tap Hamill — sometimes on the body, sometimes on the head — to signal a stop in the action.

The referee has been the only one stopping Hamill.

He has seven pins and has won his other matches by an average score of 14-5. Two weeks ago, he was named outstanding wrestler at the New York State Championships.

"The silence doesn't bother me," he says. "It allows me to focus on the match, to concentrate."

Hamill isn't exactly lacking for confidence, either. Asked if he thinks he can win a national title next month at Ohio Northern, he scoffs "Definitely. I haven't even been knocked down yet!"

## Obsession for perfection

When he was in third grade, a friend mentioned to Hamill that soda pop was unhealthy. He hasn't taken another sip since.

No alcohol, either. When Hamill attended parties in high school, he would take a beer can, empty it and fill it with water, just to fit in.

Hamill is obsessed with being healthy, and his muscular 6-foot, 175-pound is Exhibit A. He loves pancakes before a match and enjoys an occasional milkshake, but he stays away from candy. And if someone is smoking? Forget it.

"He's afraid he'll get second-hand smoke," his mother says.

He's just as religious about

**"Wrestling helped him grasp that he has a handicap but can still achieve something."**

JANET RICH

Matt Hamill's mother

wrestling, working out 365 days a year — including Christmas.

Once unable to accept his condition, Hamill now is a role model for others. In high school, he would go to schools for deaf children and tell them to get involved, get a hobby. If he sees a deaf child at a match, he will give out his phone number or call the child and preach that they can be whatever they want.

"I don't consider myself handicapped," he says. "A person with no legs, that's handicapped."

Communicating through the TTY system, Hamill is in regular contact with his number one fan, too. Janet Rich regularly makes the arduous nine-hour trip to RIT — that's *one* way — to cheer Matt on.

"I remember when he was wrestling at Junior Nationals at North Dakota," she says. "I didn't think I could make it, and he kept saying 'Don't worry, don't come.' But at the last minute I took a Greyhound. When he saw me his eyes just lit up."

"I probably baby him too much, but I can't help it."

Hamill's sights are set on the NCAA Division III Championships March 7-8 in Ada, Ohio, 2½ hours from Loveland. This summer, he will compete in the Deaf Olympics in Copenhagen, Denmark, a tournament for which he qualified last summer.

And then, who knows? The big dream is the Olympics, and Janet Rich isn't about to tell him the odds.

"He's learned through wrestling that almost anything is possible," she says. "Once he sets his sights on something, he goes for it."

And as 23 opponents can attest, the result is usually Matt Hamill on top. □