

MEAN GENE MILLS:

SU's Fabulous Freshman Eyes the Eastern Title

By TOM BATZOLD

Gene Mills is 5-foot-6 and weighs 118 pounds, just 20 pounds more than the 98-pound weaklings in those body-building ads. With floppy brown hair and a boyish face, he looks like the guy you'd expect to play the lead in Peter Pan. "He's a regular munchkin," says one of his teammates.

Put him on a wrestling mat, however, and you have a completely different person. Pound for pound, Gene Mills may be the best wrestler in the East and perhaps the country. His coach thinks he may also be one of the meanest.

"He just doesn't want to win — he wants to punish people in the process," Syracuse wrestling coach Ed Carlin says of his freshman sensation. "He figures if he can tear someone's head off in the first few minutes, they won't have anything left near the end of the match."

"He had one kid nearly crying down at Hofstra. The guy was moaning because his arm was all twisted and Gene had a big grin on his face. He was eating it up."

"I talk myself into not liking my opponent," Mills says. "I try to think of him as an enemy of mine but my goal isn't to hurt anyone. All I want to do is win."

He usually does. At Syracuse this season, he's 20-1 and the favorite to win the 118-pound title in the Eastern Championships at Manley

Field House this Friday and Saturday. As a two-time New Jersey high school champ, he was 99-8 and if you to want to include AAU summer tournaments, his overall record is an amazing 516-16.

"My father helped me through high school," Mills says. "He made me drill every night so he could beat up on me. He really didn't force me to wrestle — he just encouraged me."

Despite the glittering high school record, Mills was ignored by many major college recruiters who didn't feel he would be strong enough to handle the college competition.

"I'm really weak for my size," Mills says. "They call me 'Spaghetti Arms' because I don't have any muscle. But I've got long arms — I'm like a monkey — and I'm able to use them to gain leverage when I wrestle."

Actually, Mills' wrestling style would have to be considered unorthodox. He is, in his own description, "poor on my feet" and his best move on the mat would make a wrestling purist cringe.

"My best move is supposed to be a violation of sound wrestling," Mills explains. "The first thing you're taught is to never use a half-nelson when you're on your knees. But it works for me."

"He never lets up, not even in practice," Carlin says. "I have to calm him down sometimes. He wants to go wrestle my heavyweights."

"I knew he'd be good but I never expected this. A couple of times I figured his bubble was going to burst but it hasn't happened yet."

Mills has won 16 consecutive matches since an early-season loss to a senior from Clarion. Over the weekend, he wrestled against Lehigh's Steve Bastianelli, who had beaten Mills two of three times in AAU competition. This time, Mills won easily, 9-3.

Next up is the Eastern tournament at Manley, where, barring an upset, he should place high enough to earn a trip to the NCAA finals. Mills, as cocky as he may seem on the mat, takes nothing for granted.

"I really don't know where I stand," he says. "I have no way of comparing myself with wrestlers from around the country. I wish I could have wrestled some returning national placewinners to see where I stand."

No matter what happens the rest of the season, Carlin knows Mills has the potential to be Syracuse's next national champion.

"He's had a much better freshman year than John (Janiak) had," Carlin says. "The biggest thing is to keep him in shape and don't let him get carried away by all this. Some guys get too cocky after they've had so much success so soon, but I think we can keep his head on straight."

Mills knows he will soon be a marked man.

"People will be gunning for me," he admits. "Right now, I'm still unknown."

10 Unbeatens on Section Three Mats

By NEIL KERR

Only 10 wrestlers will bring perfect records into the annual Section Three Tournament at the Onondaga County War Memorial next Saturday, and that number is sure to shrink further during the day.

Of the 10, seven have been awarded No. 1 seeds for the sectional finals. The unscathed seven are Steve Grau (24-0) of Beaver River at 105 pounds, Fred Festa (15-0) of Rome Free at 112, Tom Pickard (27-0) of Baldwinsville at 132, Mike Bauer (26-0) of Vernon-Verona-Sherill at 138, Bill "Buzzsaw" Wilson (21-0) of Carthage at 155, Tim Hyer (25-0) of Ilion at

167, and Charbel Karrat (27-0) of New Hartford at 177.

In the lineup of Section Three seedings (see listing), RFA's Festa does not appear at the top of the 112-pound class because he is recovering from an injury. It remains doubtful whether he will be ready to wrestle this week, but he will receive the No. 1 seed if he recovers, and if another of the 16 qualifiers is unable to take part.

If Festa fails to appear, Cicero's Jim Pecori (23-1) will be top-seeded, ahead of defending 112-pound champion John Elmer (25-2). Pecori won last year's 105-pound sectional

crown, but Elmer received the "Most Outstanding Wrestler" award after a convincing victory at 112. Thus, it is surprising that Elmer is only No. 2-seeded, and it will come as no surprise if he repeats as Section Three 112 king Saturday.

Another returning sectional champ is 155-pound top seed Wilson of Carthage, last year's 145-pound winner.

The fourth and final sectional champion still in action is B'ville's 105-pound Carl Kristeller, a champion at 91 pounds last March but now only fifth-seeded at his new weight.



P-S Photo by Clem Murray

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