

**Wrestlers, coaches, fans all involved**

# *The Easterns are something special*



**Joe  
Gross**

One of the most colorful and exciting spectacles in sports is the annual Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association championship tournament.

For the second straight year, the Easterns are being held at the Naval Academy's Halsey Field House. And, for the second straight year almost every available hotel and motel room within 20 miles is filled with persons either involved in or interested in the wrestling tournament.

Wrestling crowds are as colorful as the tournament itself, which features athletes from 15 institutions. The fans are more vocal than most and instinctively twist and turn and slither across the seats as they put themselves in the wrestlers' position while they cheer.

The coaches are also vocal and also go through almost impossible contortions as they holler advice and backing to their proteges on the mat.

In the Easterns' preliminary and quarterfinal rounds there is wrestling going on on four mats simultaneously. Whistles are blowing, horns are buzzing and scoreboards are flashing lights for each individual match. And fans and coaches are screaming together for any one of the eight men sharing the spotlight.

For most wrestlers, the Easterns is the epitome of their careers, which for the majority, comes to an end with graduation from college.

The extensive dieting and strength-sapping workouts which have been going on since November — and long before that for some — all become worthwhile as the days before the tournament dwindle down to a precious few.

The workouts no longer sap the strength. The dieting becomes more intense and the desire for victory overrides all else in the minds of the young men who will compete. Most of the wrestlers, who go through the entire season as much as 15 — sometimes more — pounds below their normal everyday weight, suddenly find the ability to drop even more so they might compete in the next lower weight class, where their strength might be more conducive to winning.

The Easterns is the beginning of the road toward a national championship, which, naturally, is the ultimate dream of every collegiate wrestler to step on a mat. It is, in fact, a dream which first floats into the mind when a youngster begins wrestling with any success as a sophomore or junior in high school and even sooner for those fortunate enough to start very young in a youth wrestling program.

Injured wrestlers somehow become healed enough to get their shot at winning when the Easterns begin. Some who have not fared extremely well during the season,

somehow improve to the point of challenging the favored contenders. Others become nervous enough to wrestle inexplicably poor, despite doing well in dual matches during the regular season.

It's just one of those things which can bring out the best or worst of very many wrestlers. It separates the calm from the easily upset. But, no matter what kind of person a wrestler is, he is nervous and jittery as he begins competition in the Easterns.

As the referee's whistle blows and the first contact between the wrestlers occurs, the natural nervousness vanishes and the seriousness and dedication, which goes with wrestling in this prestigious event, takes over.

It is a time when you rarely find a smiling wrestler — unless he has just won an unexpected victory. Until you win the final bout — the championship — a victory is nothing to smile about; it only serves to advance the wrestler toward that final goal.

Every match is a crucial one — even those in the preliminary round — since each victory puts points on the board toward the team championship, which is nearly as prestigious as an individual title. Even the wrestler who doesn't have the slightest chance of winning an individual championship — none will ever admit to that — knows his match is important. It may be the difference between his

being a member of the Easterns championship team and being just another wrestler. A big difference when the years pass and tales of college days can be tales of glory.

Many of those able to the tales of glory — former Easterns wrestlers — will be in the stands cheering for their former teams and remembering their own experiences in similar positions. The former Easterns wrestlers are almost always a part of the tournament, either as a presenter of a trophy or a behind the scenes worker — there are many unheralded persons who work many hours to make the tournament run smooth — or just a fan.

A majority of wrestling fans are not "just" fans, however. They are dedicated, hard core followers of the sport of wrestling and more particular their favorite college team.

Wrestling fans have been known to travel halfway across the country in large bands just to lend support to their favorite team wrestling at an important match. Such crowds are on hand in Annapolis this weekend.

These loyal fans are part of the Easterns, just as the wrestlers and their coaches and their diets and workouts and colorful uniforms and nervousness and seriousness.

This is what the Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association championships is all about.