



COURIER-EXPRESS / DARLENE DRABIK

Heavyweight Ken Gates of Eden has control of Starpoint's Dan Bright. The match was in last weekend's Lewiston-Porter Tournament.

Dan Bright: A Study in Determination

By Mike Billoni

COURIER-EXPRESS STAFF REPORTER

Starpoint Central has never been a Western New York wrestling powerhouse but that could change considerably if 16-year-old freshman Dan Bright has his way.

Bright is an out-going, goal-oriented, positive individual who is trying to build the Spartans' mat program in the Niagara-Orleans League.

Last fall the husky freshman went through the halls at Starpoint trying to convince several classmates to try out for the wrestling team. It was a tough sell at first, but by the time Coach Jim Gately began practice, he faced the largest turnout of wrestling candidates in school history.

More than three-quarters of the 40 aspiring grapplers were underclassmen recruited by Bright.

"Dan has become the sport's recruiter at Starpoint and he has done an excellent job of getting kids interested," said Gately.

Bright may never become a league or state champion for the Spartans because of a physical handicap, but that does not hinder his determination to excel.

Born with deformed feet, which were amputated from the ankle 15 years ago, and deformed hands, Bright has never allowed his handicaps to get in the way of what he wants to do in life.

He began wrestling when he was six and although his handicap puts him in an obvious disadvantage during a match, he will never use it as an excuse.

"The handicap doesn't hinder me in any way, except I wish I could be a foot taller," Bright said after losing a match in the heavyweight (217-pound) class in last weekend's Lewiston-Porter tournament.

When he's not wrestling, Bright stands

6-feet tall by wearing artificial legs. Before a match, he removes them and bounces out to the mat on his stumps as a 4-foot-4 competitor.

"I'm pretty short when I go out there," he said. "But Mr. Gately has been working with me on moves I can use and during practice we are always testing certain moves to see what will work."

"During a match I just go out there, grab the guy and then try to do anything that comes to mind," he added.

"I know I'll improve over the years but by my senior year I'd just like to break even. If I was a junior this year I'd really get upset with a loss but it doesn't bother me much because I know I have three years to improve."

Bright, a varsity wrestler as an eighth grader, posted a 3-13 record last season and is currently 2-8.

"When he wins a match the whole team goes nuts because they really like him," the coach said. "This is the good thing about our sport because it allows a person with a physical handicap to compete."

Bright has caught the attention of spectators every time he competes but that doesn't bother him, either.

"If I didn't want them to see me, I wouldn't wrestle," the son of Roy and Jean Bright said. "I'm certainly not going to hide in some closet."

"My mind went fuzzy when I saw him take off his artificial legs," said Eden's Ken Gates, who beat Bright in last weekend's tournament. "I couldn't believe what I was saw and once we started wrestling, I couldn't believe how strong and determined he was to win. If he had legs, I'm sure he would have beat me."

"After seeing the determination in his eyes, I'm convinced he is going to win a big match one of these days."

Bright's father credits the Shrine Hospi-

tals in Philadelphia and Erie, Pa., which he has visited regularly since his birth, for helping build his son's self confidence.

"Nobody in this area had any real positive ways to help him," he said. "But at the Shrines they had him walking in 18 months and once he got that positive attitude from them he became a go-getter."

"We never let him feel sorry for himself and everything he has ever wanted to do we have tried to find a way he could do it," continued his father, who is presently constructing a pair of skis his son could use on the slopes.

"When he was six I wanted to get him involved in a team sport and at first Danny didn't want to but after he saw a wrestling match and listened to Coach Gately, he became interested. Once he competed and realized he could do it he fell head over heels for the sport."

As a 200-pound sixth grader he began wrestling in Junior Olympic matches in Niagara County and the following year he was Starpoint's varsity manager. That year he also won the regional, state and Northeast age-group qualifiers and competed in the week-long Amateur Athletic Union national tournament in Lincoln, Neb., where he earned a bronze medal for a third-place finish.

"There were only three wrestlers in my weight class," he said with a laugh, "but it was still great experience for me. It was a thrill being a part of 9-10,000 kids wrestling all week down there. I just wasn't old enough or experienced for the nationals that year but it was still worth it."

"My goal this summer is to qualify for the Empire State Games," he said with confidence.



COURIER-EXPRESS / DARLENE DRABIK

Dan Bright (left) and teammate Jonathan Treichler check tournament pairings and results.

DETERMINED WRESTLER

Continued on Page 8

Determined Wrestler Wants Gridiron Next

Continued from Page 6

Sophomore Jonathan Treichler, one of Bright's recruits at Starpoint, is proud of his teammate who is building the wrestling spirit at their school.

"Danny proves anyone with a handicap can go out for a sport and do well if they put their mind to it," Treichler said.

"It takes a lot of guts to come out and do what he is doing," sophomore Stephen Tisack added. "He's a great kid and a lot of fun at practice."

"I told all these guys to come out for the team," Bright said. "Anyone who said no I told them to at least try the sport and everyone who did has enjoyed it."

"It's going to take a few years but we are going to have a good team here," he said. "It has taken so long to get people out for the sport but now we are telling them to just try it because we know they will like it."

Bright's greatest obstacle at Starpoint is convincing his family doctor and school officials he and wrestling teammate Ed Barney (who has cerebral palsy) are capable of playing football for the Spartans.

Bright wants to play using his artificial legs. "I went out for the junior varsity team last fall but my doctor said I couldn't play because he was afraid I'd get hurt," Bright said. "I can't buy that because it's my decision to play and if I get hurt, I get hurt."

"I can run just as fast with my artificial legs as other players. In fact, I even run faster than some of them. Plus, football is a good way for me to get in shape for wrestling."



Dan Bright

"They have a rude awakening because I'm going to play this year."

With his determination, it's going to be very tough to stop him.