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X-Cel-ing to Rio

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On a chilly November evening in Philadelphia, thousands of wrestling fans packed The Palestra on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania for the National Wrestling Coaches' Association All-Star Classic, pitting the No. 1 and No. 2-ranked collegiate wrestlers in the country against each other in a season-opening event.

Among the headliners were Ohio State's Logan Stieber, a three-time NCAA national champion vying for his fourth title this season; Missouri's J'Den Cox, a sophomore who became the only freshman ever to win a national championship at 197 pounds last season; and four other national champions in a group that included 20 All-Americans.

But with an event featuring many of the sports' stars, the biggest draw of the night was a person who did not compete. Kyle Dake - a 2013 Cornell graduate who is the only collegiate wrestler to win four national championships in four different weight classes. As soon as he walked into The Palestra, the former Sports Illustrated Male College Athlete of the Year was swarmed by a group of middle school wrestlers wanting his autograph. Then, before the matches started, the P.A announcer, Scott Casber, introduced Dake, saying how it was an honor to have one of wrestling's biggest stars in the building. After the matches ended, the media and fans of all ages swarmed Dake.

The Cornell graduate went back and forth between the groups begging for his attention. He posed for photograph after photograph, completed several media interviews and never broke his smile. And Dake talked with each of them like he was their best friend, giving them the time they had lined up and patiently waited for.

But while Dake is the face seen to many on the outside, there's a man working behind the scenes to make sure Dake can concentrate fully on wrestling in the hopes of winning that Olympic gold medal. Long Island-based sports agent Nick Garone, has assembled what could be a "Dream Team" of wrestlers as his clients, headlined by Dake, but featuring three other wrestlers - Tony Ramos, Helen Maroulis and Adeline Gray - who all have gold medal ambitions.

Even though Dake finished his collegiate career in historic fashion, one of his main draws is what he potentially still will accomplish -- a gold medal at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio. While there's no guarantees the former Cornell graduate will accomplish the feat, he is being set up to do so by Garone. Unlike some of his competitors, Dake is able to train full time with his former teammates at Cornell, and avoid working a side-job because Garone has set Dake up with five sponsors, including wrestling-brand powerhouse Brute. Garone handles all representation matters for Dake and three other athletes, from their personal appearances, to publicity to sponsorship deals.

With Dake's list of accomplishments, Garone is able to easily market the wrestler.

"Kyle did something that is very unique, was an Ivy League student, an Academic All-American and a four-time champ in four different weights, so it made him stand out," Garone said. "Twenty years from now, people will still be speaking about what he did."

In his short stint as a wrestling agent, Garone's already garnered quite the reputation in the wrestling community, allowing him to land some of the sports' elite as his clients.

"Nick is just a good guy, I trust him and I'm not worried when we do deals," Dake said. "I know he has my back 100 percent of the time and he's going to fight for the best deal out there. He's not just worried about his bottom line or making money, but he's worried about my well-being so it was an easy decision to go with him."

Garone isn't concerned about making money like the stereotypical sports agent often portrayed in Hollywood movies like most of them in Jerry Maguire or the more recent Million Dollar Arm. Instead, he is focused solely on what's best for his wrestlers, even if it means less money for him. He's focused on their image, their training schedule and their financial well-being. If a deal doesn't fit their priorities or their schedule, he has no problem backing out of it. His main priority is making sure his wrestlers have whatever they need to accomplish their goals. And that shift in priorities from most sports agents is because of a frustrating first stint as a sports agent nearly 20 years ago.

At the time, Garone was in the midst of a frustrating first stint as an agent, where he marketed several NFL and NBA players. But he struggled to find his niche there, so he transitioned to becoming several boxers' agents, where he promoted fighters and fights all over the world, including in London's Wembley Stadium and New York's Madison Square Garden.

At first, he loved boxing and the athletes. He grew up a fan, and felt like it was the right fit. But he began to feel underappreciated, as his clients were always asking him for more and more, and not appreciative of what he had just done. As a result, Garone started getting turned off to the sport and some of its competitors.

"It was one of those businesses where you're 'only as good as the last thing you've done for me,'" Garone said. "I was very emotionally attached to these guys, I lived slept and breathed boxing, but I didn't think it was reciprocated, so I started getting turned off to it."

That's when he looked to transition to wrestling – a sport and community he knew since he is a former wrestler himself.

"Wrestling is my world, it's something I've excelled in," Garone said. "It was an opportunity to get back into my world and something I love to do with something I'm talented in, and that's manage, market and promote these guys."

In order to get back in the community, Garone became a broadcaster for the MSG Network covering the sport. He also took up a job as the wrestling coach at Eastport-South Manor High School on Long Island. As a high school coach, he took his team to Cornell's wrestling camp every summer. While there, he built a relationship with Dake – a relationship that was the beginning of something neither of them realized at the time. Garone knew Dake would be a highly sought after athlete after he finished his career at

Cornell, and he thought it was as good of a time as any to give a second chance at being a sports agent.

“Wrestlers don’t have these multimillion dollar pay days, so they’re very appreciative, they’re more than happy to do appearances and to build the sport because we are hungry as a sport, to get that attention and notoriety,” Garone said.

Maroulis Makes a Statement in High-profile Match

After signing Dake in April 2013, Garone began expanding his client-base when he found two female wrestlers –Helen Maroulis, who looks like a model, and one of the sports’ most dominant competitors in Adeline Gray. Aside from her outside beauty, Maroulis is a five-time U.S. Open Champion, a four-time World Team Member, a World Cup Champion, and a World Silver Medalist. She was also the first female in Maryland to place at the high school state tournament, and she did it twice.

Even though Dake was Garone’s headline wrestler at the All-Star Classic, Maroulis competed in an exhibition match against Jillian Gallays from Canada – the No. 4 ranked wrestler in the world – before the start of the collegiate matches that night. In what should have been a close match, Maroulis dominated, winning 10-0 on a technical fall. Just 30 seconds into the match, Maroulis took Gallays straight to her back with a fireman’s carry dump, which was followed with three takedowns, to win with one second left in the first period.

“Helen is basically a model,” Garone said. “She’s gorgeous and beautiful and she’s also a total badass. She’ll crush you and people dig that.”

Garone’s other female client – Gray – won the 2012 and 2014 World Championships and is currently ranked number one in the world at 67 KG (148 pounds.) She is also a five-time World Team member and two-time Dave Schultz International Champion.

“Adeline is so sweet and so beautiful, and she’s really putting herself in a legendary status as a woman wrestler,” Garone said. “Being a two-time world champion has made her one of those names that will stand the test of time. Not just for women, but men also, what she’s done as a United States representative, not too many people can say they have two world championships under their belt.”

Earlier this year, Garone added his fourth wrestler – Tony Ramos, a product of the national powerhouse University of Iowa. Ramos won the NCAA championship at 133 pounds as a senior after finishing second as a junior and third as a sophomore. He also won the Big Ten championship and was a two-time runner-up, compiling a career record of 120-14. While there are plenty of wrestlers who have won NCAA titles, Garone saw something else in Ramos.

“Tony has that little bad boy edge to him, that ‘I’m going to kick your ass and I don’t care what you think about me’ type of attitude,” Garone said. “Which you love that, you’re intrigued by that even if you don’t like Tony.”

Right after Garone signed Ramos, the Iowa product qualified for the 2014 World Team. Now, what once was nothing more than a dream – Cornell and Iowa are wrestling rivals – has become reality, and Garone’s wrestlers are hoping to join what surprisingly is a short list of U.S. wrestlers that have won the sport’s highest honor – an Olympic gold medal.

“At first we were kind of rivals [Dake at Cornell and me at Iowa], but now we’re all trying to be on the same team, so it’s pretty interesting,” Ramos said.

The first meeting in Long Island

One week after the All-Star Classic for college wrestlers in Philadelphia, Garone put together an All-Star Classic of his own at Hofstra University on Long Island for high schoolers in the area. Some of the best wrestlers in the world competed at the Bill Farrell international event, but, with Garone’s help, they added on a clinic and All-Star match for the local high schoolers. It was also a perfect opportunity for Garone to bring his wrestlers together from all over the country to help out the wrestlers in his home area.

“This is an event I’ve been thinking about for years,” Garone said. “It’s not about who wins the dual meet - it’s more about getting the best kids to wrestle each other. We see it as similar to the NWCA All-Star Classic, but at the high school level. As long as we get the best guys wrestling, it will be a win.”

For the event, Garone had Dake and Ramos as the two celebrity coaches. He also had the two put on a clinic shortly beforehand. Meanwhile, Maroulis and Gray were also in attendance. The day beforehand, those two put on a clinic for girls aspiring to better their skills.

The event was also the first time his four-person team was together at the same time. So with his four wrestlers all there, Garone spent time with them and wanted them to get to know each other. After all, the members of the team all have the same goal, a similar list of accomplishments and of course the same manager, so they can potentially help each other out in several ways.

It also brought up the most necessary conversation – who the best wrestler in the group is.

“We definitely have a lot of firepower,” Ramos said. “It’s an elite group of athletes that he has and it’s an opportunity to work with each other, so that’s tough.”

With all of the firepower, Ramos said it’s difficult to say who the best wrestler on Garone’s team is. But he ended up deciding that he has to say Gray because of her two world championships.

Dake agreed with Ramos that Gray is the best wrestler on the team, but also took a stab at himself.

“So far I’m the only one on the team who hasn’t made a world team so I’m his least productive athlete,” Dake joked. “But hopefully I can change that this year.”

A pretty bold statement from someone who is considered one of the greatest – if not the single greatest – wrestler of all time.

Gray, meanwhile, had her own thoughts on whom she thought was the best wrestler in the group.

“I’d probably have to go with Nick,” the Denver-native said with a laugh. “He outweighs us by a couple of pounds. He’d probably win in that situation, I definitely wouldn’t want to wrestle him, that’s for sure.”

Even though Gray was joking with her comment about Garone being the best wrestler in the group, she wasn’t completely off base. When he competed, Garone’s wrestling accomplishments were nowhere near the marquee of some of his athletes, but he still had a pretty decorated career.

After winning the New York state championship at Patchogue-Medford High, Garone went to Syracuse University on a full wrestling scholarship and was coached by one of wrestling’s all-time greats, Gene Mills.

After two years at Syracuse, where Garone won a New York State Collegiate championship at 142 pounds, he transferred to Old Dominion. While at Old Dominion, Garone won the Eastern Conference Championships to qualify for the NCAA tournament, where he finished in sixth place to garner All-American honors. His accomplishments, which also included six gold medals at the Empire State Games, led to his election in the Suffolk County Sports Hall of Fame in 2010.

After college, Garone stuck with wrestling in hopes of making the U.S. Olympic Team for the Barcelona Games in 1992. In 1991, Garone was named an alternate to the Pan-American Games team. Then, in hopes of making the Olympic Team, Garone won the Eastern Olympic Trials to advance to the U.S. Olympic Trials. But during the Olympic Trials, Garone tore his hamstring in the middle of a match, forcing him to miss the rest of the qualifying tournament – essentially ending his competitive career.

Even though he didn’t know it at the time, he was just setting the foundation for what would turn out to be his livelihood.

Dreams Nearly Crushed

| Garone's dream of promoting his wrestlers was nearly crushed after after the 15-member executive board of the IOC removed wrestling from the core sports of the Summer Games after the 2016 Rio Olympics in a February 2013 vote.

Olympic officials complained to wrestling officials that their ancient sport had antiquated leadership and matches could be dull, with results not easily understood by spectators. But in wrestling's 11th hour, it presented an opportunity for Garone to promote the sport and his athletes in a way not seen before.

"It brought people out more than it ever has in the past," Garone said. "People that aren't wrestling people were saying they can't take wrestling out of the Olympics, so it gave an opportunity to get that publicity."

The IOC eventually voted to reinstate wrestling for the 2020 and 2024 Olympics. But despite all the excitement of given another opportunity, wrestling's fight is not over. It is not an Olympic "core sport" yet and only safe through 2024, for now. Therefore, Garone is also thinking about the future – and pretty far into it.

Shortly before Maroulis' All-Star Classic match, Garone overheard three-year-old Juliana Joshi talking to her mom. While she was dancing around in her NWCA All-Star Classic t-shirt and pink bowtie in her hair, she kept asking her mom if she was going to meet Maroulis – the only thing she really cared about that night.

| Garone overheard the young girl's request, and went up to her mom and said he could get Maroulis.

A few minutes later, Joshi stopped dancing on the mat and looked up for a second. When she did, her eyes lit up, as she saw Maroulis approaching her. Joshi's eyes lit up and she ran up to Maroulis and leapt into her arms to give her a hug.

"She loves Helen, it was like her meeting Tinkerbell," Jennie Joshi said. "Helen's such a role model for women in wrestling, and she [Juliana] just loves wrestling."

After Juliana, who is from Morristown, N.J., got to talk to Maroulis about her wish to wrestle once she turns four, the two wrestled for a minute, with Joshi's mom and Garone kneeling nearby, laughing.

"She was so cute, she sat in the front and watched wrestling the whole time, so that was cool to see," Maroulis said. "I know it's sometimes hard for parents to let their daughter start up in a sport, especially in a state where we don't have all women's wrestling, so just to hear that she's going to get that opportunity is really cool."