UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Free-spirited Ed Ruth takes a unique approach to his chosen sport – and it’s working

Quentin Wright’s best Ed Ruth story – the best one he’ll tell in mixed company, that is – takes place on the team’s recent flight home from Nebraska, when the charter plane hit heavy turbulence. “The whole plane is shaking – everybody’s starting to freak out,” Wright said. “Ed’s just sitting there. Watching his movie.”

Penn State’s 174-pounder continued watching “Conan the Barbarian” on his laptop until the plane dropped what Wright guessed was 50 feet in less than two seconds. Ruth, still unperturbed, glanced up simply to figure out why his computer had bounced five inches off the tray table.

Frank Molinaro’s best Ed Ruth story involves a piece of advice. Ruth once offered to share his special diet, which he insisted was foolproof: coconut water, Gatorade, V8 Splash... and sardines.

“Out of the tin,” Molinaro said. “He sits in the locker room and eats them out of the tin.” Recounting the story, he made a face and shook his head – and smiled. (He also declined to partake.)

But everyone’s favorite Ed Ruth story – “There are a lot of Ed stories, by the way,” assistant coach Casey Cunningham said – is how after more than a year in the Penn State wrestling room, Ruth had no idea that head coach Cael Sanderson and associate head coach Cody Sanderson are brothers.

Steve Sanderson, the family patriarch, was visiting practice one day, and Ruth was making conversation. “Do you have any other children,” Ruth asked, “besides Cael and Cyler,” the
You can see it. Taste it. Feel it. It's all coming from people who just want to be so serious about the sport.

“Usually when you have a laid-back mentality, you relax more. The nervousness—that’s canceled out. You don’t feel like it’s a life or death situation. You feel, ‘I’m going out there to have fun.’ And I’m going to go back in the room and have fun.” And treat everything as fun rather than hard work.”

Which doesn’t mean that Ruth isn’t working hard.

“Ed Ruth is one of the most competitive guys I know,” said Cunningham, who often drills with Ruth in practice. “I know he comes across as, ‘Oh, maybe it doesn’t matter’ or ‘it’s just fun and games.’ You see him out there, and he’s smiling, having fun. But he doesn’t like to give up points. He doesn’t even like to give up points in practice.”

Ruth is a gifted athlete who tried football, track, basketball and swimming before settling on wrestling. He’s got a fluid, graceful style that sets him apart on the mat, and he’s deceptively strong. You have to be in order to hit cradles from a standing position, as Ruth did against Ohio State’s Nick Heflin.

He said his early non-sanctioned athletic exploits—doing flips in the living room, learning how to walk up and down the steps on his hands—have made him a better wrestler, too.

“Stuff like that really helps your back muscles and shoulder muscles and all that,” he said.

At Susquehanna Township High School outside Harrisburg, Pa., Ruth finished fourth and fifth at the PIAA championships, then spent a season at wrestling powerhouse Blair Academy in New Jersey, where he was a 2009 high school All-American.

He settled on Penn State when Troy Sunderland was still the coach. He wasn’t sure who the new coach was; he knew only that Cael Sanderson was the name on his wrestling shoes.

“He doesn’t follow the sport too closely, which I like,” Sanderson said. “Some of the guys, they know everybody and everybody’s life story, who beat who, all that. Ed doesn’t know that. He doesn’t pay attention.”

Not getting caught up in the hoopla allows Ruth to focus his energies on the mat. He’s a student of the sport—Ruth watches other wrestlers, and if he sees a move that might work for him, Cunningham said, he’ll practice it until he gets it.

As a redshirt freshman, Ruth cruised into the NCAA tournament with only one loss, but with an injury to his meniscus that he thought had healed. Then in the quarterfinals against Nick Amuchastegui of Stanford, his knee locked, and Ruth had to injury default.

There was some talk that Ruth wasn’t really hurt; he’d been losing 9-2 when he defaulted, but he and Sanderson said that was because of the injury. “Most people would holler out when they’re hurt,” Sanderson said. “He didn’t holler out. Six points later, he’s getting dominated. But a lot of that’s just because he’s a tough kid.”

It took athletic trainer Dan Monthley nearly 20 minutes to unlock Ruth’s knee, which he then taped so it wouldn’t extend too far. Ruth said he figured, “I can do this without my leg,” returned to competition and beat the fifth- and third-seeded wrestlers to finish third.

He had surgery after the season.

Sanderson said, “It’s one of the most incredible things I’ve seen in my career in coaching.”

That display of strength was from the same wrestler who doesn’t mind chatting with his little brother minutes before he steps on the mat. The same wrestler who, before the Nittany Lions’ grudge match against Iowa in late January, maintained that until he got to practice that Monday, he thought the next opponent was Ohio State.

“Ed’s a funny guy—he may have been joking,” Sanderson said. “You never know with Ed.”

Lions decline to take part in Mat Mayhem team tourney

BY TIM OWEN
Blue White Contributor

Earlier this month, 24 of the top teams in the country began competing in the National Wrestling Coaches Association/Cliff Keen Division I National Dual Meet Championship. Nicknamed Mat Mayhem, the opening rounds of the event featured Iowa, Minnesota, Cornell and Oklahoma State, among others.

The main goal of the tournament is to crown a consensus national dual meet champion, while helping attract spectator and media interest across the country. Penn State, however, was not part of the crowd.

“It’s just not something that we feel is in the best interest of wrestling,” Nittany Lion coach Cael Sanderson said. “It was kind of forced in last March when the coaches were occupied with the postseason.”

In accordance with the new format established by the NWCA, the 24 participating teams were divided into four groups of six teams each. The groups opened the tournament at regional sites on the campuses of Rutgers, Iowa State, Cornell and Oklahoma State.

Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Oklahoma State won their respective regional brackets and are set to compete in a “Final Four,” reminiscent of the NCAA’s postseason basketball tournaments. They will meet for the national title Feb. 19 in Stillwater, Okla., a location that was announced after the first round.

The choice of locations was one of Sanderson’s objections to the tournament. The NWCA should not stage the event on campuses where support for wrestling is already strong; he argued, contending that doing so will only stifle the growth of the sport. Instead, Sanderson said, the association should allow up-and-coming teams the opportunity to host events such as Mat Mayhem and use the ticket revenue to grow their program instead of handing it over to the NWCA.

“How is not having home duals in February good for wrestling?” he said. “We don’t want to keep regionalizing wrestling and just build off of events that are in strong areas.”

Penn State’s absence from the Mat Mayhem brackets caused some participating coaches to speak out. Minnesota’s J Robinson called the decision “short-sighted on Penn State’s part.”

“You’re not going to root for the quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. You’re rooting for who? You’re rooting for the team, right?” Robinson said. “That’s what you have with the national duals, and if you want [wrestling] to grow, you have to have national dual meets.”

Sanderson agreed that team dual meets are probably the best way to grow the sport, but the NWCA’s new format isn’t the right way to go about it, he said, calling it “panic mode.”

“The numbers are growing, and there is more interest in college wrestling right now than there has ever been in the history of wrestling,” Sanderson said. “[It’s] not panic mode, because when you hear panic mode, who invests in a sinking ship? Nobody.”