

U.S. Navy Olympic Wrestler Named Team Captain, Meets Muhammad Ali, and is Ready to Wrestle in Sydney

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The U.S. Navy's Olympic wrestler, ABE1 Steve Mays, has had quite an experience so far in Sydney, Australia. He's been elected by his teammates as the captain of the 2000 U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling team, got a chance to meet boxing superstar Muhammad Ali, and is now ready to go after the gold.

Mays and his family live in Pensacola, Fla., but he is attached to USS John F. Kennedy out of Jacksonville. He has served on active duty in the U.S. Navy for over 15 years and works as an aviation boatswain mate. He is a native of Kalamazoo, Mich., where he attended Gull Lake High School.

Thirty-four-year-old Mays, the U.S. competitor at 54kg/119 lbs, is the oldest member of the U.S. Greco-Roman team and has been chasing his Olympic dream since the late 1980's.

"I am truly honored," said Mays. "It is rewarding that the guys feel this way about me. When they said that they were going to elect just one captain, rather than two like they had in Atlanta, I thought they would go for some other guy. I'm both surprised and happy."

"They saw something in me that might help them to reach their goals," Mays added at the U.S. Greco-Roman Wrestling press conference on Sept. 17 in Sydney. "I've worked long and hard. I've run the good race. I've also been in the Navy for 15 and a half years. That's my job, to serve my nation. Wrestling is one of my duties. I'm taking a little break from my job to be here and to do the job for the nation with my wrestling. The Navy has allowed me to concentrate on my wrestling. My other duties are secondary. When this job is over, however, I will return to my other job."

Prior to the press conference, Mays and the entire team met "The Greatest," Muhammad Ali, in person at the U.S. Olympic office in the Athlete Village. Ali made a surprise visit to the village to meet the U.S. athletes and encourage them in their efforts. Ali was a 1960 Olympic gold medallist in boxing, and became the most popular person on the planet during his illustrious athletic career. Ali was named the Greatest Athlete of the Century by numerous media outlets this past year. Ali was the person chosen to light the Olympic torch when the Summer Olympics were held in Atlanta, Ga. in 1996.

The meeting has special meaning for the team members, who all considered Ali among their athletic idol. Mays had a chance to joke around with Ali, who was throwing punches and laughing with the athletes.

One of the highlights for the wrestling team came when Ali had his picture taken with Fraser. That's Steve Fraser, 1984 Olympic Champion Greco-Roman wrestler (and one of this year's coaches), not Joe Frazier, the former World champion boxer who fought Ali in three memorable battles. When Fraser was with Ali, Mays and some of the other athletes chanted "Frazier, Frazier."

Ali won the gold in 1960, but can Mays win a medal in 2000?

"He's got a tough weight, but if he wrestles up to his ability, he can wrestle with anybody in the world," Don Chandler, U.S. Greco-Roman Wrestling Team Olympic Head Coach, told **Navy/Marine Corps News** in August. "The competition is so tough. There are literally 20 wrestlers in each weight class, and out of those 20 there are probably 10 guys that could win the weight class. I'd say Steve's right in there. We know technically he beat the silver medallist from the last Olympics, so he's a contender."

"Mays has paid his dues and then some," said Gary Abbott of USA Wrestling. "For years, he has been a force on the national Greco-Roman scene, but did not break through on top until the 1999 World Team Trials, when he made his first U.S. team. In 2000, he lost to Olympic silver medallist Brandon Paulson in the nationals, but came back to dominate the series at the Olympic Trials. Mays is explosive when he is on - and the plan is for him to peak for Sydney."

"Steve Mays is the most upstanding guy that I know, great morals and great athlete at the same time," said Dennis Hall, 1996 Olympic Silver Medallist and 1995 World Champion, in an August interview with **Navy/Marine Corps News**. "He's got the whole package and that's why he's where he is today."

"To say that I don't want to medal would be selling myself short," Mays said in an interview conducted from the Athlete's Village, Sept. 19, by **TheMat.com**. "If I perform to the best of my ability, that's all I can ask. If I do the best that I can, the results will take care of themselves."

Mays will have to do his best. His competition includes Lazaro Rivas of Cuba who is the reigning world champion and was named Greco-Roman Wrestler of the Year by FILA, the international federation. His weight also features Sim Kwon Ho of Korea, a 1998 World Champion and 1996 Olympic champion.

The Greco-Roman wrestling competition for 54kg will be held at the Sydney Exhibition Centre in Darling Harbour from September 24-26. Here is the schedule:

September 24

9:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. 54kg Pool Eliminations

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September 25

9:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. 54kg Quarterfinals

5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. 54kg Semifinals

September 26

9:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. 54kg Final for Fifth and Sixth places

5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. 54kg Bronze Medal Match, 54kg Gold Medal Match

The gold medal 54kg match and most of the other Greco-Roman finals will be televised on CNBC Sept. 26, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. And Mays thinks he and the rest of his team members have a good chance of making those finals.

“This team has a lot of heart, and the guys have experience,” Mays told ***TheMat.com***. “We will surprise some people. We have people who will get the job done. The fans should keep their eyes on us.”

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