

A Kid Who Doesn't Kid Around

Dan Gable, known to his family as The Kid and to 10 Russian wrestlers as the man they couldn't beat, believes that all work and no play is how to get a gold

Herman Weiskopf, June 19, 1972

It is two a.m. Dan Gable can't sleep. He gets out of bed and does sit-ups and push-ups. It is eight a.m. Dan Gable is running several miles on a dirt road. It is one p.m. Dan Gable is lifting weights and punching the heavy bag. It is four p.m. Dan Gable is starting a 2.5-hour workout in the 95 degree heat of the wrestling room. It is 7:30 p.m. Dan Gable runs to the local food store, makes a few purchases and runs back to his apartment. It is 10 p.m. Dan Gable is doing isometrics in his apartment.

This is a not uncommon day in the life of Dan Gable, whose labors are motivated by one goal—winning a gold medal in freestyle wrestling in Munich. There is little doubt that he is the hardest-working athlete in the world. Gable trains two or three times a day, seven days a week, at least 40 hours out of a possible 168—always with gusto and usually all bundled up in both rubber and woolen sweat suits. In order to compete at 149.5 pounds he sweats off 60 pounds a week; during the past decade he has lost eight tons.

Gone is the fresh complexion and boyish look he had a few years ago. At 23 his features are deeply chiseled, bespeaking the punishment he has inflicted upon himself. Often his face contorts with pain—from a badly injured left knee, from all-consuming fatigue, from forcing himself through one drill after another and then, when he is so limp that his eyes are glazed, pushing himself even harder.

"When I'm ready to stop I start wondering what the Russians are doing, and then I keep going," says Gable, who feels he must beat a Russian to win.

If he does, it will be more because of his conditioning than his wrestling talent. Although he is a skillful wrestler, there are others with equal ability.

International matches consist of three three-minute periods and, "Lots of times after the first period the score'll be close or I'll be behind," Gable says. "But after that I often feel the other guy wearing out and then I get him. Foreign wrestlers aren't like our guys. Once you get ahead of them they almost always quit."

A six-time world champion from Iran was flabbergasted when he watched Gable work out at the World Games in Sofia last year. Finally, he sidled up to Larry Kristoff, a two-time U.S. Olympian, and said, "Is there something mentally wrong with Gable?"

In his book *Confessions of a Workaholic*, Wayne Oates has written: "The workaholic's way of life is considered in America...(a) a religious virtue, (b) a form of patriotism, (c) the way to win friends and influence people and (d) the way to be healthy, wealthy and wise.... He is the one chosen as 'the most likely to succeed.' "

Gable has always been a workaholic. Mack Gable, Dan's father, got him a summer job with a cement crew when he was 15. Recalls Mack, "He was too young to work legally, so I told the boss, 'You pay him and I'll pay you back, and that way it won't cost you anything to hire him.'

Two days later I asked how The Kid was doing. The boss told me, 'I got to work at six a.m. and he was there already, lifting cinder blocks. He works so hard I gave him a 15 cent raise. Forget our deal. He's worth having on the payroll.' The Kid got up at five a.m. and ran four miles to the job. Kate [Mrs. Gable] used to ask me, 'Do you think we're working him too hard?' We didn't know what to think except that The Kid loved it."

Dan Gable has always done physical jobs the hard way in order to strengthen his body. He passed up the power mower in favor of one he could push. During the summer he usually worked in a lumberyard, where he was popular with his co-workers because he insisted upon doing the most rugged jobs himself—unloading trucks of cement bags and lumber. When there were no tasks to be done he did push-ups and sit-ups. At West High School in Waterloo, Iowa and at Iowa State he ran to and from classes. "I don't like walking," he says. "Takes too long to get anywhere."

"He was always so antsy," says Bob Siddens, his wrestling coach at West High. "I have a habit of shaking hands with each boy before and after each match. But Dan was always so anxious to wrestle that he would prance around in front of me and try to get me to shake his hand and send him on his way before the previous match was even over."

"He was always losing things—shoes, socks, jocks," Mack recalls. "I got mad at him once and he said to me, 'Dad, you got to remember that wrestlers have lots to remember, things like holds and moves and strategy.'

"When he was young he was the meanest, orneriest kid alive," says Mack. Many tales are still told. About how he came across a construction site and destroyed hundreds of bricks. About the day he chased a cat up a tree and across a roof, tearing up dozens of shingles in the process. About the time his mother took him for a haircut and he bolted out of the barbershop, locked himself in the car and refused to let his mother in. About the day he tied a boy's hands together with wire and dragged him all the way home from school. About the time he was eating an ice cream cone in the backseat of the family car, got angry at his father and whomped him on the head with the cone. About the day his mother took him shopping and he spotted a saleslady bending over and bit her rump.

Dan Gable got his share of spankings, but he and his father have always been close. Mack came to most of his son's high school practices. "One day The Kid says to me, 'I wish you'd get out of here. I was doing O.K. until you came in, and then I got whaled on.' For two, three nights I didn't go to practice. Then he gave me a picture of himself in uniform and told me to read the back. He had written, 'Missed you at practice the last couple nights. Come on back.' "

As a ninth-grader Gable lettered in three sports—baseball, football (he was a single-wing quarterback on an unbeaten team) and wrestling—and in the seventh grade he had won the state YMCA 50-yard backstroke championship. The next year he dropped out of all sports except wrestling. As a freshman he had to agonize through one of the most torturous and questionable ordeals in wrestling, cutting his weight from 127 to 95 pounds. "It was an awful struggle," Mack admits. "He went three days at the end without food and it got so bad he couldn't sleep."

But it paid off. In his first junior high match Gable trailed 3-0 going into the final period, then utilized his stamina and determination to win 5-3. After a loss in junior high he was so

distraught that he locked himself in his room for the night. In high school he never had to lock his door.

Mack, who had been a high school wrestler, used to work out with Dan. "But one day when he was a sophomore he beat me so bad I could hardly move," Mack says. "I told him that was it, that he was too good for me and that I was through. So The Kid says, 'You can't quit, Dad. Not after all the years you beat me up. You can't quit now.' The Kid never liked losing to *anybody*. Not even in practice. If someone gave it to him in practice, he got furious."

During the summer following his sophomore year at high school Dan and his parents were on a fishing trip on the Mississippi when they got word that the Gables' only other child, 20-year-old Diane, had been raped and murdered in the living room.

"When we came back we moved into a hotel," Mack says. "We were going to sell the house. Kate and I never wanted to set foot there again. But The Kid said, 'You can't do that. They took my sister from me, but I'm not going to let them take my home from me.' So we moved back in. I couldn't sleep for two years and my wife almost went to pieces. I had 15 men working for me in my real-estate office. Within a year I closed the business. But we did it for The Kid. We moved into the house and right away he moved out of his room and took Diane's room. And whenever a tough match came up, he'd say, 'Don't worry, Dad. I'm going to win this one for Diane.' "

He always did. When Gable graduated from West High he was undefeated and had won three state championships.

As he sat in his apartment recently and measured his past, Dan said, "What really turned me on was when Bob Buzzard beat the tar out of me in the wrestling room I had fixed up in our basement. He beat me so bad that I cried. He had gone to Iowa State and was a two-time Big Eight champ, and when he beat me it proved that I had to get better. This was the summer after my senior year in high school and I suddenly realized that being a three-time state champ wasn't good enough. Right then I set a goal that I'd work out *at least* once every day. That was six years ago and I've never taken a break in training since."

When he got to Iowa State, however, he found out he was not rugged enough to contend with his more experienced teammates. Day after day they worked him over, so much so that his father was ready to bring his dejected son home. "Give me 30 days," Dan said. By the end of those 30 days he had markedly improved.

"The first time I got any idea of how good I was came in my freshman year," he recalls. "I went to the Midlands tournament and beat Don Behm, who had been third in the NCAA championships in 1965. I wrestled Masaaki Hatta, a former NCAA champ, in the finals, and I remember being interviewed on radio before the match. The announcer said, 'I understand you've never lost since junior high.' I said, 'That's right, but I'm about to get licked.' Then I went out and beat Hatta by five points."

Dave Martin, an NCAA champion in 1970, was one of several wrestlers who shared an off-campus house with Gable at Iowa State. "As a freshman he was ultra-shy," Martin recalls. "We used to tease him a lot. A bunch of us would be walking down the street and we'd say loud enough for other people to hear, 'Is that Dan Gable? Is that really the *famous* Dan Gable?' He'd

get so embarrassed he'd run and hide. Dan won the Athlete of the Year award twice at school, and after they gave it to him during his junior year he was so embarrassed that he handed me the trophy and ran off.

"But I've never seen anybody work like him. He used to play this game with a deck of cards where he'd pull out a card and then do as many pushups as the face value of the card was worth. He'd see how many times he could go through the deck. And then he'd start all over and do the same thing by doing curls with a barbell.

"Dan was always giving things to people and he seemed to enjoy that. If someone was overweight, he would always try to help him lose weight, no matter how tired Dan was. And he was tough. The day after he had an operation on his elbow he was wrestling—with one arm."

Gable's toughness and his conditioning program enabled him to keep on winning at Iowa State. He became the most dynamic wrestler in college history, relentlessly pursuing his foes and pinning 60% of them.

Before the 1970 NCAAs Gable was given amateur wrestling's Man of the Year award. When the trophy was handed to him Dan merely nodded. Then everyone in the banquet hall arose and applauded Gable, who at that point had won 176 matches in a row. Everyone then sat down and waited for his acceptance speech. Gable looked at the audience, nodded and, dumbstruck with embarrassment, walked off.

Gable advanced to the finals of the NCAAs with five straight pins. Only one match lay between him and the goal of becoming the first wrestler ever to win every match throughout high school and college. He came even closer than that. With 30 seconds to go against Larry Owings of the University of Washington Gable was ahead. Then, in a blur of action at the edge of the mat, Owings took Gable down for two points, then got two more for momentarily clamping his shoulders down. When the match ended, Gable had lost.

At the victory ceremonies Gable, for the first time in his life, accepted a second-place plaque. Eight thousand five hundred fans in Northwestern University's McGaw Hall arose and applauded.

"I'm afraid Dan might commit suicide," said one onlooker. "I mean, what else has he got in life but wrestling?"

But all Dan Gable did was cry. Long before the NCAA tournament, a banquet had been planned in his honor. Although the words came slowly, Gable spoke at the banquet—about the virtues of competition, about how he had no excuse for losing and about how he was going to keep on wrestling.

"At first after the loss I couldn't face my parents," he said. "I felt I had let them down. I know they didn't feel that way, but it took time for me to adjust. I worked out a little, stayed up late, went out with the guys. I couldn't keep my mind straight. Two weeks after the loss I won the national AAUs, was voted the Outstanding Wrestler there, and that got me back on the right road."

That road has taken him almost around the world. In 1971 Gable won a gold medal at the Pan-American Games in Cali and a gold and the Outstanding Wrestler Award at an international meet in Tbilisi. "The Russians gave me all kinds of awards," Gable says. "A huge picture of one

of their great wrestlers, lots of gifts, trophies and a huge horsehair cape that weighs 15 pounds. And then 10,000 fans clapped. At a banquet afterward they kept giving me wine, and when I put my hand over my glass they tried to pour it through my fingers."

Just as Kierkegaard found that constant pleasure is no pleasure at all ("In the bottomless ocean of pleasure I have sounded in vain for a spot to cast an anchor"), Gable discovered that everlasting pain has its limits.

"Now I make a conscious effort to be more outgoing," he says. "I like to surround myself with outgoing guys because I sort of envy them. I also used to shy away from adulation, but now I realize it's an important part of sports. If a kid wants me to show him how to do something in wrestling, I take the time because I can see how much it means to him. There was one fan who flew over from Iowa to see me wrestle at the World Games in Sofia. He was too shy to even come over to me and I didn't know he was there until we came back, but if I'd known I'd have spent time with him. Once you're out of sports you're less known each year. Soon people say, 'Dan who?' You've got to make time for people *now*. That's been an important word for me—now. It's so easy to put things off, and I learned that you have to do things *now*."

Gable's priorities being what they are, though, he has postponed his fun because the time to get ready for Munich is *now*. Almost every morning he runs 2.2 miles along a dirt road on the outskirts of Ames, Iowa. One recent morning the Glass twins—Ron and Don—who wrestle at Iowa State, drove out with him for the run. Then, while Don drove Dan's car at a slow pace, Ron and Dan loped alongside. The window on the driver's side was down so the runners could hear the blaring music: "Knock, knock, knocking at my door, just like you did before." They ran past freshly manured cornfields, past goats, barns, cows and yipping dogs. Gable was almost hidden beneath layers of sweat clothes and his red hair was drenched. On they ran past wire fences, wooden fences, past horses, pigs and creeks. Ron jumped on the back of the car, exhausted. Dan plodded on at a seven-minute-a-mile clip. Sweat rained from his sleeves. When Gable finished his run his face was hollow, his eyes staring out like two burned holes in a blanket. As always, though, he chose to push himself farther, driving home with the windows up and the heater on full blast.

"I beat 10 different Russians at various world meets," says Dan, "and at a banquet in Kiev they vowed that they would find someone who would beat me."

If they don't, his injured left knee could. Three doctors have urged him to undergo surgery on a torn cartilage, but Gable has refused to take time off from practice.

"Wrestling with one leg has made me a better wrestler," he maintains. "I've had to find new ways to do things and I've improved a lot."

But he hasn't really changed. At an Olympic-qualifying tournament in Iowa City in April, Gable pinned all six of his foes, but when it was time for him to accept his award he was not around.

"I was in the hot room doing pushups," says The Kid.