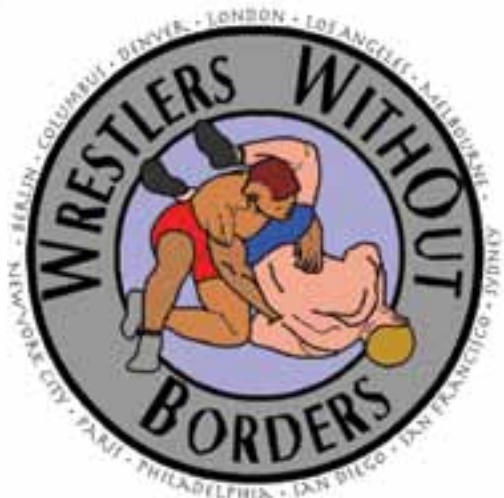




PRIDE ON THE MAT



*Paris
2018*

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF WRESTLING,
THE GAY GAMES, AND
WRESTLERS WITHOUT BORDERS**

TEXT COURTESY OF ROGER BRIGHAM, GENE DERMODY,
JOHNNY ALMONY, CHRIS LOREFICE AND TONY GALUZZO



“BACK IN THE DAY...”

Movement grew underground

Before the Gay Games, long before the internet and email, gay and straight grapplers fed their hunger for matches on the dark fringes of urban life.

The most effective *modus operandi* for closeted gay wrestlers to meet was through secretive word-of-mouth referrals and mailing lists

published by various pre-cyber clubs, such as the New York Wrestling Club, Gillespie's List and New Orleans Wrestling Club. The forerunners of today's cyber contact lists and social media, they provided the same functions: communication and contact. Some of it was good, some of it was bad: you got in touch and took your chances.

Before Gay Games I, the "Challenge in '82" for wrestling had already been tackled by wrestling organizers from California. Most notable were Don Jung, coach of Golden Gate Wrestling (GGWC), and Pete Runyon of Southern California Wrestling (SCWC). The evolution from the seedy and dangerous closets of so many legitimate gay wrestlers, to the downright inspiring achievements of what became Gay Games I, had its roots back in the late 1970s in Southern California.

SCWC had emerged as the first legitimate club in the late '70s, flourishing under businessman Runyon and a



Wrestlers often met through magazine ads.

very talented, competent coach, Mike Rio, who was a part-time wrestling coach in Orange County, a Los Angeles Police Department officer, and a macho hunky Hollywood extra.

SCWC dominated Gay Games I and II. SCWC's efforts were enhanced in 1981 when Tom Waddell asked Jung

to create a legitimate freestyle club in San Francisco, separate from the more playful and unstructured San Francisco Wrestling Club. This became the GGWC, and both clubs scheduled many inter-club competitions every year.

Jung was already well known and respected in California.

A state champ at both Vallejo

High School and Chabot Junior College, he became the coach at Mission High School in San Francisco. He and his good friend and fellow coach at Riordan High School, Steve Swanson, built the GGWC in time for Gay Games I, and enlisted the proactive support of many California coaches and officials.

The YMCA teams in New York and other cities also were fertile ground for meeting other wrestlers. Bars featured wrestling events in which the winners were given cash prizes. Eventually a very loose underground of legitimate wrestlers formed and endured.

***“Inter fœces et
urinam nascimur”***

– St. Augustine



1982 built mainstream ties

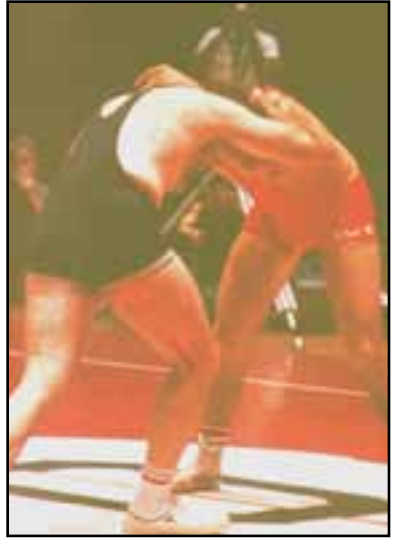
The 1982 Gay Games wrestling tournament secured much coveted California USA Wrestling (CA-USAW) sanctioning as a legitimate competition without much fanfare. In fact, wrestling is the only sport to have received official sanctioning for every Gay Games.

The sanctioning brought medical and liability coverage as well as experienced, competent officials. But it implied a connection to the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), which 19 days before the Opening Ceremonies had won a court injunction yanking the word "Olympic" from the original title of "Gay Olympic Games."

Top officials were enlisted, most notably Andy Foley, high school coach of one of the Gay Games current wrestlers, Calvin Malone. Robin Chambers was a well known and respected Nor-Cal wrestling tournament pairing official who proved to be a phenomenal asset.

An inspiring opening address was delivered by Allen Abraham, former coach at New York's Columbia University, Athletic Director at the time of San Francisco State, and now Dean of Students at SFSU.

Drawing a parallel with the anti-Semitic prejudice he had endured at the New York Athletic Club decades earlier to the challenges of acceptance facing the gay wrestlers of 1982, he not only instilled a sense of pride, but issued a challenge to the wrestlers to stay involved for change. The speech moved the audience to tears as the wrestlers realized they were about to make history.



Top photo: Steve Swanson of San Francisco (in red) wrestles at 180 lbs. An English teacher and coach at Riordan High School, he died in 1989.

Left photo: Peter Gomez of San Francisco (in blue) at 136.5 lbs. blocks Larry Blakeley, who moved from Tennessee to Los Angeles after the Games. Both were dead by 1992.



GAY GAMES II

Clubs emerge as AIDS strikes

The success of the wrestling tournament in Gay Games I created a wave of energy and change throughout the underground wrestling culture.

The hunger to continue the personal and athletic contacts made at the first Gay Games led to the emergence of legitimate wrestling clubs in other cities before Gay Games II. The New York Knights, the Boston Strangers and the Philadelphia Spartans were just three of the many new clubs that sprang up modeled after Southern California and Golden Gate.

While the gay freestyle wrestling community was organizing, university folkstyle programs were being dropped by hundreds of schools. Straight wrestlers displaced by the Title IX-blamed cuts often found their way to the new "gay" clubs, which then were able to draw enough participation for regular practices. The close personal day-to-day contacts that developed destroyed stereotypes. Wrestling's institutional homophobic fears, fed by ignorance, were dealt a mortal blow.

Every Gay Games has had 10 to 20 percent heterosexual wrestlers. Gay Games wrestling has always been about acceptance, not sexuality.

A sense of pride and camaraderie manifested itself in a lot of very definitive cult/club-coded T-shirts. Gay wrestlers

used these to identify each other when attending mainstream wrestling events such as the Olympic Trials or the NCAA championships.



Scott Velliquette of Southern California Wrestling triumphed for gold in 1986.

But the euphoria was tragically short lived. In the gay-ghetto cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, AIDS was cutting a deadly swath through the ranks of the emerging sports leadership. Within a few years of Gay Games II, GGWC coach Don Jung, SCWC coach Mike Rio, Gay Games founder Tom Waddell and hundreds of other leaders were dead.

Ignorance, fear and hopelessness became the hallmarks of once thriving clubs. Don Jung committed suicide the day after his Gay Games II matches. Mike Rio and Tom Waddell followed a few years later. Many of the straight wrestlers would no longer practice with the clubs. Even the clubs' participation and volunteer efforts in local tournaments were no longer sought or appreciated. The years from 1985 to 1989 were the darkest period as many gay wrestlers disappeared off the face of the earth virtually without a trace.

But the seeds for revival had already been thrown, and Gay Games III would prove to be a rallying point for the future.



Founders set tone for future

The success and growth of gay wrestling is the legacy of the hard work of heroes from the past.

Don Jung brought credibility to Gay Games wrestling, leveraging his mainstream reputation and skills as a competitor and coach to found Golden Gate Wrestling within the Bay Area Wrestling Association and California-USA Wrestling. Jung brought on board many other very influential people who signed on to our credibility as early as 1982. One of them was Allen Abraham San Francisco State; another was Steve Swanson.

Swanson was an Archbishop Riordan High School wrestling coach and teacher in the late 1970s and early 1980s, who had to support the games and compete under an alias.

Pete Runyon's financial management of the first gay club in the late '70s, Southern California Wrestling Club (SCWC), was the prototype of economic resourcefulness. Their wrestlers carefully balanced the integrity of the sport with crowd appeal in order to have fun – and raise money.

Gary France's term as coach and president of GGWC (1988-1994) brought about the establishment of the GGWC CA-USAW charter and the institutionalized program within the San Francisco Parks & Recreation offerings. France's persistence with basketball's Tony Jasinski in finally earning the acceptance of gay sports at the Eureka Valley Rec Center in the Castro (now the Mark Bingham Gym), was a political milestone. That relationship survives today, and is the key to the success of SCWC, San Diego Bulldog Wrestling and GGWC.

Kathleen McAdams and Rochelle Robinson were both California women's free-style wrestling champions who came out of the GGWC program to compete in Gay Games. The ultimate achievement was Rochelle's performance as an out lesbian at the USAW freestyle nationals in Orlando in 1998.

Gene Dermody is the only wrestler to have competed in every Gay Games.

The wrestling legacy continues to grow. Author Jim Provenzano's experience wrestling in the 1998 Gay Games inspired him to write the first coming-of-age wrestling novel, "PINS," adapted into a play and featured during the 2006 Gay Games.



Don Jung formed Golden Gate Wrestling Club in 1981 at the request of Gay Games founder Dr. Tom Waddell. After coaching the team through the first two Gay Games and medalling in both, complications with AIDS drove him to suicide before Gay Games II ended.



GAY GAMES III

The Games go on the road

The Gay Games gained true international stature in 1990 in Vancouver, the first time they were held outside the United States under the newly re-formed Federation of Gay Games.

The turnout from California's decimated and demoralized wrestling clubs was its lowest participation ever in terms of percentage of entrants. But New York and Philadelphia emerged as the new powerhouses, with substantial increases in Canadian, Australian and European wrestlers.

Even with AIDS taking its toll, the event saw a strong renewal of interest in banding the various wrestling clubs together in order to exert influence on the running of the Gay Games wrestling tournament. Wrestlers who had been to previous Gay Games were so disappointed by the organization of the wrestling event at Gay Games III that an informal meeting of club leaders immediately after the tournament resulted in the formation of the International Wrestlers Alliance (IWA). It had support from seven clubs (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tampa, Phoenix, New York, Philadelphia and Houston) plus 7 individual representatives from Sydney, Vancouver,

Toronto, Montreal, London, Frankfurt and Amsterdam.

In 1992 IWA was incorporated as a 501c4 California non-profit organization, but its application to join the FGG did

not meet Federation requirements. Instead, Golden Gate was granted a position as a temporary stand-in until IWA could meet the rigorous standards. In 1995, IWA changed its name to Wrestlers WithOut Borders (WWB) because of a brand name conflict with a professional wrestling group. In 1997 CGWC

officially transferred its organizational directorship in the FGG to WWB.

From 1992 to 1996 a resurgence of gay clubs occurred in several cities. New York actually had three thriving co-existing clubs for many years: the Knights, Metro and Twin Towers. Several factors were responsible, including a better understanding and management of the AIDS crisis, the emergence of the internet and email as a primary mode of communication, and a change in the LGBT community culture that was moving away from a preoccupation with bars and baths towards other more mainstream activities such as sports.



The Vancouver games triggered changes in wrestling that led to the formation of WWB.



Women earn spotlight in '94

The wrestling tournament for Gay Games IV in New York reached numerous and momentous historic high notes.

After New York was selected as the host city, a strong contingent of local women successfully pushed for inclusion of women's wrestling. Gay Games IV became the first time women's wrestling was offered, 10 years before the Summer Olympic Games followed suit with the 2004 Games. It proved to be the most celebrated event of the Gay Games.

"An athlete all my life, I have to say that wrestling in Gay Games IV was one of the all-time highlights," said 1994 medalist Cathy Seabaugh. "Competing against women from Holland, feeling the energy and excitement of a packed house at the venue, ultimately reaching the finals in my weight class, it was a day I'll always cherish.

Another major breakthrough was the full cooperation of a major university and its wrestling staff to put on the event. New York University's execution of the Gay Games IV wrestling became the standard for future Gay Games. Buoyed by the women's registrations, the total number of wrestlers hit 160: a number never matched since.

"Growing up in southeast Missouri watching our high school wrestlers win their way toward a state championship, I always admired the sport," Seabaugh said. "I imagined myself out on the mat, grappling with women my age and size



Women's wrestling debuted in Gay Games IV, a decade before the 2004 Summer Olympics.

to test myself. I wondered how aware I was of my balance, my ability to strategize how to pin an opponent who might have longer arms and legs. I wished I would have a chance to wrestle in a recognized competitive setting.

"I got to college and finally had a chance to compete in a contact sport — rugby. It was an amazing training ground for my wrestling competition in 1994 at the Gay Games in New York. When I arrived in New York, I never had wrestled a woman in an official match. It was an exhilarating experience in so many ways."



GAY GAMES V

Wrestlers prove their class

When the Gay Games made it to Europe for the first time, no one knew what to expect.

Not the spectators at the University of Amsterdam, nor the competitors on the mats, nor the representatives from the Netherlands Wrestling Federation.

Confusion about rules, scoring and pairing, coupled with an impromptu decision to shorten the day and cancel matches just to get out earlier, caused angst among the wrestlers.

The wrestlers responded with their usual aplomb.

At the end of the day, the frustration of the wrestlers boiled over into symbolic gestures of defiance. The emotional high point of the tournament was a direct result of this defiance.

In the awarding of the gold and silver medals in the men's open 76 kg, the gold was incorrectly awarded to Robert Lebeau of San Fran-

cisco and the silver to Gary Bertonis of New York City. However, Bertonis had decisively beaten Lebeau in a head-to-head match up, and it was the cancellation of subsequent matches for Bertonis that caused the points inequity. After the medals had been awarded on the platforms, Lebeau and Bertonis climbed down from the platform, switched

medals, and re-mounted the platforms much to the chagrin of the officials. The applause of the wrestlers was thunderous. In three other similar cases, medal awards had to be adjusted in order to defuse the "sit in" defiance of wrestlers in front of the officials table.

The emergence of Amsterdam's Tigertje Wrestlers as a powerhouse was

another positive for the event. Tigertje's post tournament party featured consolation matches and a surprise visit from one of the Netherlands Wrestling Federation officials, who came to offer his belated congratulations and appreciation. He admitted he was impressed, and that the NWF had not given Gay Games Wrestling the credit it deserved. He then proceeded to wrestle Greco with some of the wrestlers.

There were many German, French, and English wrestlers in the

stands who had not registered to wrestle. Many were unaware of the event, many underestimated their abilities, and many did not believe that the event would be legitimate. That would change. Some 30 European wrestlers met informally with WWB delegates to remedy the problems and plan the Sydney 2002 event.



When Robert LeBeau was awarded the gold medal, he passed it on to New York's Gary Bertonis, who had beaten him head on.



Novice day highlights Sydney

Sydney's tournament in 2002 was greatly enhanced by the early and enthusiastic involvement of the local wrestling community and the legacy left by the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.

Larry Papadopoulos and his wife, Aly, owners of the "Boxing Works" on Castlereigh, let the wrestlers work out and weigh themselves all week. They also hosted the wrestlers' party, and processed a lot of the tournament paperwork.

New South Wales Wrestling's (NSWW) support was crucial, especially that of Don Brown and the mat officials.

A new addition to the Gay Games program was a novice day for wrestlers new to the sport. It proved to be a great success.

Australian Olympian Leonard Zaslavsky's program for the novices inspired many of the elite and experienced wrestlers to pitch in and help out with the coaching. Many of the novices who wrestled in the exhibition tournament Sunday enjoyed it

so much they entered the regular tournament the next day.

The novice program added an element of camaraderie and fun to the event that settled the wrestlers' nerves heading into the Monday tournament.

Sydney Coach Brendan O'Shea, organizer Barry Webb, and the other wrestlers of the Harbor City WC (HCWC) — Andy Quan, Gilbert Gundersen, and Neil Bowyer — were gracious hosts and tough wrestlers.



Tournament organizers: Kurt Brinschwitz, Peter Verey, who had worked on the Sydney Olympics, and Gene Dermody



Russian connection: Sydney officials Maya Feigleman (Sydney), Alex Ostrovskiy (San Francisco) and Sam Feigleman (Sydney). Alex and Sam were teammates on the 1956 Soviet national team.



GAY GAMES VII

Sweating in the Windy City

After presumptive Gay Games VII host Montreal decided to withdraw late in 2003 and announced it would establish a rival event, the FGG contacted the previous bidders and, after Chicago and Los Angeles expressed continued interest in hosting, held a second site selection vote. Chicago was then chosen in March 2004.

Organizers were faced with the task of putting together the event in a two-year turnaround, rather than four, and for the first time in Gay Games history faced a rival in the battle for registrations. Fortunately a very positive working relationship was quickly established between Chicago Gay Games and WWB, relying on the invaluable tournament work book created previously by Peter Verey.

Notable connections were also established with Chicagoans Steve Roth, who served as WWB liaison throughout the planning stages; and Josh Watkins, who founded Chicago Wrestling Club to serve as host club. Establishment of a club in Chicago, in the heart of a wealth of American wrestling talent, had been a prime objective for WWB once Chicago was picked. Cyclone Wrestling Club, later renamed Chicago Wrestling Club, provided an outlet for LGBT-centric wrestling for the first time in decades. CWC, with a large influx of local Russian talent, was able to put in dominating performances at the USA Nationals in Las Vegas.

WWB was also fortunate organizers selected Rob Smitherman as sports coordinator for wrestling. Smitherman, a tall, lanky basketball player, was impressed by the can-do attitude of the wrestlers, especially when community volunteers failed to show up in the 100-degree weather. In all, 100 wrestlers contested 100 bouts. Hardest fought weight class was men's 82 kilo masters, the top four finishing with identical 4-1 records. Smitherman's working relationship with the wrestlers was so impressive that he was named an Honorary Wrestler by WWB, was the WWB delegate to the FGG meeting later that year, and volunteered in the WWB's fund-raising beer booth. WWB has been blessed by his leadership with the subsequent hosts in Cologne and Cleveland.



Calvin Malone works for backpoints in a win over Sam Stewart in the men's open 82-kg gold medal match. Photo by Jay of Jay W Photo



Grappling hooks

The biological appeal of wrestling

Many sports lay claim to being the oldest of all. Only wrestling has the written record to support its case.

In the opening of the most ancient recorded epic, the Sumerian legend of "Gilgamesh," a young and irresponsible king finds his life transformed when he wrestles a giant from the forest, a man-beast named Enkidu.

In a dramatic bout in the muddy streets, Enkidu is suddenly beaten. Out of the match in the muck a remarkable, somewhat homoerotic bond is formed. The two go on to conquer the world as far as they can stride and challenge the very gods. After Gilgamesh passes through profound grief on the death of his dearest friend, he becomes a truly great king, worthy of the enduring epic dedicated to his life.

What gives wrestling such eternal appeal? What earns it the enduring loyalty of so many of its converts? The answers to those questions can be found in the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, literature's greatest grapplers.

Wrestling harnesses aggression appropriately and effectively. Wrestling creates transcendent bonds of camaraderie. Wrestlers gain the confidence to



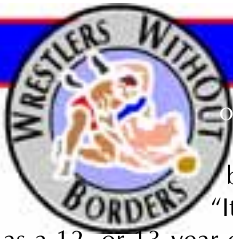
Wrestling has a rich tradition of building powerful bonds, whether on a university team (above), a sports club, or individuals pairing up on their own.

extend their ambitions, and the skills to succeed. And the prolonged close physical contact provides a non-sexual release while stimulating powerful hormones.

Sexuality and wrestling

Despite the social strides of the past few decades, the mainstream wrestling establishment often is perceived as hostile to gays. Non-wrestlers often project their own erotic fantasies onto the sport. But by creating coaching and competition opportunities, gay friendly clubs have disproved that sexuality plays a central role in what happens on the mat. As WWB founder Gene Dermody, winner of the 2014 Waddell Award,

Continued on next page



THE ALLURE OF WRESTLING

o told author Dan Woog in the groundbreaking book *Jocks*, "It's so intimidating as a 12- or 13-year-old to walk into a wrestling room in the first place, with all those sweaty people rolling around. If you're gay or think you might be, it can be almost impossible.

"We've got guys who had drug and alcohol problems and sex addictions. Now they're wrestling, and maybe for the first time in their lives, they feel good about themselves. All that sexual stuff is unimportant. But this — wrestling — is real. We're not a sex club or a self-help group. We allow gay men to relate to each other on a nonsexual level. A lot of gay men have trouble relating in nonsexual ways. Wrestling lets you do that."

Transcendent bonds

Veteran wrestlers tend to talk about the grapplers they have met and the relationships formed on the mat and beyond more than the bouts themselves.

"To me, wrestling means a great experience, working out, comradeship,

new friends and a close bond to other wrestlers," said the late Southern California Wrestling Club's Pete Runyon. "Finding men with a mutual interest in wrestling has proven a great satisfaction.

"I joined three active clubs when I came out: wrestling, skiing and biking. In each case I made new friends and added to my life experience.

"Wrestling brings you closer together but also challenges you more than most sports. A lot depends on your aggressiveness, desire to win and physical fitness.

I guess it satisfied physical and mental urges."

Appropriate aggression

Gilgamesh may have been the first wrestler to emerge as a world leader, but certainly not the last. Epics and history are filled with grapplers who led by force of intellect, muscle and will. From Greek mythology there was the mighty warrior Ajax. From antiquity there was the world conqueror Alexander the Great. In modern times there was President Abraham Lincoln, who led the United States through a bloody civil war into a stronger unified, more inclusive existence.

Plato considered wrestling the most civilized of combat sports because the goal is conquest through control, not defeat through destruction.

"Wrestling allows a woman to step into a world we've been locked out of for centuries," said Gay Games IV grappler Cathy Seabaugh.



Wrestling: force, form and function.

THE ALLURE OF WRESTLING



“To feel the grip of another woman’s hand around your arm or leg, to battle against her body as she’s trying to drive your shoulders to the mat, all in a sport atmosphere, is exciting and gratifying. Wrestling, like rugby, allows us to test our physical limits in a way sports traditionally associated with females do not. I recommend every woman try it.”



Said Runyon, “When you see guys on the mat who are in an impossible situation and all of a sudden they break free – then you know they have the driving spirit that is so important in life.”

An egalitarian sport, it favors no single body type. Short, tall, fat, old, young, muscular, deaf, blind, slow, fast, amputee: each has inherent advantages if the wrestler has the discipline to master technique. Its diversity and egalitarianism are built into the rules.

Participation and Inclusion

Mainstream wrestling is a young person’s sport. The wrestling fostered through the “gay clubs” is geared to those who enter the sport regardless of age or medical status. In Chicago, the Gay Games for the first time offered a 50 years and older age division that drew nearly 10 percent of the registrations. Oldest in the field was Noel Baggett, 65, of Golden Gate. One of his coaches, Roger Brigham, 52, returned to wrestling after 28 years. In 2004, Brigham became the first person to wrestle in a USA Wrestling freestyle event on artificial hips. “This wouldn’t have been possible if there weren’t gay clubs focused on non-elite wrestling,” Brigham said.

When transgender activist and author Donna Rose, an Olympic hopeful for the 1980 Canadian national men’s wrestling team in her youth a decade before she transitioned, decided late in life to try a comeback to the sport she enjoyed so much in her youth, she found few opportunities.

“When I transitioned, I expected I’d have to give up everything I had used to define myself previously,” Rose said.

She trained with Golden Gate in 2006 and wrestled in the club’s Memorial Day Tournament, then won a gold medal at the Gay Games in Chicago.

“Most doors were closed to me because of the fact the sport wasn’t built for a 50-year-old woman going to work out,” Rose said. “I came to Golden Gate partly out of frustration. That lit the fire that could have been extinguished.”





2006 was a year of change

The events of 2006 had deep repercussions throughout the LGBT sports world, affecting WWB as much as anybody. The Montreal World Outgames, founded to compete with the Gay Games, foundered in its registration drive and ended up losing more than \$4 million; its wrestling tournament drew barely two dozen wrestlers and featured only a handful of bouts. In contrast, Chicago Games worked for the year after the Gay Games ended to finish flush.

The FGG underwent a three-year change of its membership structure, with member organizations such as WWB surrendering board rights and burdens to concentrate on their own missions and branding. Simultaneously, WWB revised its bylaws and broadened its mission.

- A two-tiered WWB membership structure was adopted in 2006 and membership opened up to individuals as well as clubs.
 - In 2007, at Golden Gate's 25th annual Memorial Tournament, renamed the Don Jung Memorial Tournament, the first members of the new WWB Hall of Merit were inducted as part of an effort to recognize the pioneers who built and maintained WWB and the sport. That year also marked the launch of new WWB club tournaments in Philadelphia, New York City and San Diego, helping to maintain year-round interest in the sport.
 - In 2008, the first WWB Cup, a new global championship for our wrestlers (and the bragging rights that go with it), was held. Offered in non-Gay Games years, the first Cup was held in Chicago, site of the previous Gay Games.
 - WWB members took lead roles in robust discussions of Gay Games drug-testing policy in 2004 as the FGG sought ways to make drug-testing less onerous and more sensitive to the medical needs of its athletes. The result was a successful restriction of random testing in 2006, a policy that was revived at the close of the 2010 Gay Games following a motion introduced by a WWB delegate.
 - WWB continued to grow, with Paris-Lutte rejoining and new clubs forming in Denver and Columbus.
 - WWB fought to revise Red Book descriptions for Gay Games wrestling to allow more competition opportunities. The Cleveland Gay Games offered non-gi grappling for the first time and is now a mandatory component for all Gay Games that offer wrestling. Optional components include Greco-Roman and beach wrestling.
- Clubs have long benefitted from the visits of coaches from other clubs to share techniques, and WWB has explored other ways for us to help each other. In 2009, several clubs joined Golden Gate WC to staff a concession booth at the Folsom Street Fair, enabling them to split the profits. The experiment was so successful that the Don Jung Memorial Tournament was moved to September to be on the Saturday of the fair day weekend.



WWB becomes truly global

The Cleveland Gay Games gave WWB a renewed sense of energy and provided a glimpse into its future.

In offering grappling for the first time, WWB showed how to offer a fun, competitive grappling competition, modifying the rules to make sure that safety was still observed, and varying belt levels of competitors were accommodated.

Cleveland also showed that straight athletes were increasingly joining WWB Clubs in greater numbers after the Chicago and Cologne events. Many actually competed in the Cleveland Gay Games. In previous Gay Games, straight athletes often hesitated to compete openly in a gay tournament, just as gay wrestlers had felt the need to be closeted in straight tournaments and clubs.

In the years leading up to Paris, there was also a greater realization of globalization taking hold in WWB. The new WWB does the majority of its outreach and marketing done through social media. Even WWB events that had once been more regional or national are becoming global, as the growing influence of clubs in Melbourne, Sydney, and Berlin expand the attendance of other club tournaments and wrestling camps.

Globalization and increased social acceptance of LGBTQ+ athletes has also presented challenges. With many wrestlers in the US and other countries now able to come out in school and even compete openly as LGBTQ+ athletes, fewer wrestlers feel they “need” WWB clubs as a safe space to practice. Between the 2006 Chicago Games and the 2014 Cleveland Games, some WWB clubs folded, became more straight than gay, or decreased in numbers.

At the same time, however, with wrestling still being a small sport globally, many straight athletes found their way into WWB clubs and gave us a new audience with which to share our mission. The Sin City Classic in Las Vegas hosted by the So Cal Wrestling Club, and the San Diego Bulldogs annual tournaments, for example, are mixed tournaments with gay and straight athletes competing.

WWB also expanded during that time, adding member clubs in Melbourne and Berlin in 2016. WWB clubs also began to evolve outside of their traditional roles, and many outreach programs to the greater community grew out of WWB clubs in places such as San Francisco and Sydney.

Going into the Paris 2018 games, there is a renewed sense of excitement in the WWB community. The Board of WWB is more diverse than at any point in its history. There are also future WWB clubs on the horizon, with Boston having started a club in March that is soon expected to join WWB, and Seattle restarting a program in a city that has long been without one.

The future success of WWB will be secured if a new generation of leaders and wrestlers steps up to continue the work started by our founders.

— **Chris Lorefice, WWB Chairman**



GAY GAMES VIII

Good times in Cologne

As the Gay Games ventured back into Europe for the first time since the Amsterdam Games in 1998, it was clear there were unique challenges faced by the organizers. "Tournament fatigue," caused by the creation of a secondary quadrennial sports festival in the Outgames, was taking a toll on registrations. The second World Outgames, held the year before, drew about half the number of registrants as Montreal.



Photo: Xrispics

WWB had supported the 2009 WOG, offering two scholarships, but found no takers. Three WWB wrestlers did attend at their own expense, but the tournament drew just nine wrestlers, ranging from lightweight to super heavyweight. After considering the high cost of the event and the strain on organizations trying to support multiple quadrennial events, WWB joined several other organizations in calling for an end to the WOGs and a return to the "one quadrennial event" system that had served the community since 1982 with the Gay Games. The Gay Games offer the best opportunity for the "critical mass" of global sports participants without asking the athletes to subsidize the cost of conferences and parties.

The Cologne wrestling registration was the smallest Gay Games turnout since the event started offering women's wrestling in 1994. The 1QE confusion, a depressed global economy, and lack of clarity over Cologne's drug-testing policy were all seen as contributing factors. Thirty-eight wrestlers competed, however, and showed no diminishment of talent level. The competition highlight was the return of Harbour City WC to the Gay Games after having missed Chicago. Housed on the outskirts of town in a wrestling "mini-village" with several other WWB competitors, the Silverbacks won three medals and proved so charged up by the experience that they travelled to San Francisco the next several years to participate in the Don Jung Memorial Tournament, donating their share of the funds to help establish the Cbus Wrestling Club.

Off the mat the wrestlers took full advantage of the fantastic (and inexpensive) local cuisine. When all of the other athletes left the Opening Ceremonies and headed downtown to find a late night supper, the wrestlers, with no debate, headed en masse in the opposite direction to find a bistro where they could eat and party without having to wait for service. The bistro owners were delighted to have the unexpected business.



The Cleveland connection

Gay Games IX in Cleveland was a watershed moment for wrestling for a couple of reasons.

First, it was the official introduction of No-Gi Grappling as a sport at a Gay Games, included under the WWB umbrella. Although the number of grapplers was small, the event was a success and will be included in subsequent Gay Games, where it can only grow.

Second, following the inspiration they got from wrestling at Gay Games VIII in Cologne, the three attending Sydney wrestlers decided the unique experience need to be shared back home. A plan was formed to get as many wrestlers as possible to Cleveland. A commitment was made to get Australian wrestlers to more tournaments including the Don Jung Memorial tournament. This was to gain experience as we were all beginners, to build connections with WWB, and prepare ourselves for Cleveland.

At Gay Games IX in Cleveland, 12 Sydney wrestlers competed, which was an amazing outcome from just three wrestlers in Cologne. This became the event that cemented the solidarity among the Australian wrestlers. The competition shaped the future of wrestling in the Sydney Club. Connections were made with other wrestlers from around the world, including Europe and the USA that brought the clubs closer together. As Sydney had no coach, Roger Brigham from GGWC stepped up despite his own physical challenges and became our international coach in our corner.

The Gay Games experience had a positive effect on Sydney wrestlers who competed. They went back and wanted even more wrestlers to share the experience. This led to the beginning of a second Australian wrestling club, the Melbourne Wranglers.

In 2015, the Harbour City WC travelled to Melbourne for two workshops to seed a new club. Late in 2015 the Melbourne Wranglers were born, with the support of the Sydney club. They quickly found their feet and although there are close ties between the two Australian clubs, they are a force of their own and strongly independent and will be strongly represented in Paris.



Team Sydney turned out in force for GGIX

– Tony Galluzzo, Harbour City Wrestling Club



ALEX and KEVIN



Between Gay Games IX and Gay Games X, the WWB family lost two of its finest friends and coaches: Coach Abraim "Alex"

Ostrovskiy and Coach Kevin Martin.

Kevin was such an important influence on my life and I really miss him. He was an amazing human being in his ability to coach, officiate, wrestle, and continue with his passions after surviving a stroke.

I remember his unassuming nature in sharing his skills, without any baggage — no artificial colors, flavors or preservatives. He and Coach Alex, both national/international level coaches and mat officials, were wrestlers first. Period.

I was first introduced to Coach Alex in October 1997. I had just moved to San Francisco from Maui, and started practicing with Golden Gate Wrestling.

It wasn't long before I became his chosen 'crash-test dummy' and 'translator.' I did not have a lot of wrestling skill and I definitely did not speak any Russian.

Alex was much like any relative in the house I grew up in: He was of my mother's generation and not good at communicating in English. It was easy for me to be around him and understand what he was saying. I guess I helped him feel more comfortable coaching and generously sharing his vast knowledge with the team. He emphasized simplicity in series of moves and counter-moves, without a lot of extra "blah, blah, blah..."

By simply becoming 'body aware,' you only needed to be proficient with a few moves to be competitive.

It wasn't long before I was being invited for dinner and vodka with him and his wife at their downtown apartment. He encouraged my progression in wrestling: winning matches, developing coaching skills, and learning to officiate wrestling matches. Someone as knowledgeable and well traveled as Alex could have easily surrounded himself with only the most elite athletes. However, he humbly preferred helping anyone who politely asked, regardless of skill level. Alex had what would be considered a prestigious career. But he was not in wrestling for the prestige: he was in it for the sport. He honestly looked forward to Tuesdays when he would ride the train to the Castro to join our practices.

He was your brother, or father, or friend in sport regardless of nationality, religion, age, gender, or politics.

I hope to be as respected and enthusiastic as him when I grow up.

— *Johnny Almony, GGWC Captain Emeritus*



Outgames goes bust in Miami

When organizers of the 2017 Miami World Outgames stunned the LGBT sports world by announcing at the last minute that the event was cancelled, the event was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, and hundreds of athletes were stranded en route or already in Miami having wasted travel costs, registration fees and vacation time.

Fortunately, wrestlers from WWB were not among them.

WWB was one of several LGBT sports organizations that had declined offers to work with the host organizers because of the weakness of the World Outgames as a legitimate sports event and the lack of sports oversight in previous editions.

The World Outgames (WOG) began when Montreal organizers, who had been selected to host the 2006 Gay Games, refused to sign a license agreement with the Federation of Gay Games and instead created the alternative World Outgames, first held in Montreal in 2006 two weeks after Gay Games VII in Chicago. A licensing body, the Gay & Lesbian International Sport Association (GLISA), was created. In 2004 it was announced the World Outgames would continue in 2009.

The attempt to co-opt the Gay Games' mission was questionable from the start. There was no oversight to make sure that host decisions were guided by athlete interests rather than those of the tourism and event planning industries. Each edition of the World Outgames drew fewer and fewer athletes.

Copenhagen organizers of World Outgames 2 asked for the endorsement of WWB for 2009. WWB followed through by helping and sending a few organizers. But WWB could find no one to use two scholarships it offered, and in the end the tournament was reduced to one round-robin of matches that unsafely combined lightweights with heavyweights. When Antwerp asked for help with WOG 3 in 2013, WWB declined and suggested the event drop wrestling. Instead Antwerp ended up combining wrestling and marital arts into a single workshop with no tournament or even individual bouts. WWB then researched interest levels in helping Miami in 2017 and found there was still no interest among members for working with Miami or for attending the event. Miami dropped wrestling at the beginning of April 2017.

With the cancellation of the Miami event, the World Outgames and GLISA appear to have ceased to exist. Organizers are currently facing a class action lawsuit and a criminal investigation is ongoing.

Since 1994, WWB has been allowed a major say in the organization of every Gay Games wrestling tournament, including policies, public relations, marketing, pairing, operations and scheduling. It requires hundreds of hours of cooperative work among WWB representatives, members of the FGG, and the host organizations. The results have consistently been professionally run and officiated matches under safe conditions and inclusive practices, with United World Wrestling (UWW) sanctioning, for the members of WWB clubs.

WRESTLERS

WITHOUT BORDERS

Hall of Merit

Michael “Mitch” Ertel – Dermody Citizenship Award

Barry Webb – Lifetime Achievement Award

Class of 2018

Cameron Inthapangna

Christopher Lorefice

Gus Scheerbaum

Rob Smitherman

Joe “Josh” Watkins

Nick Zymaris



Past Inductees

Allen Abraham
Johnny Almony
Roger Brigham
Philippe Bruno
Matt Carey
Russ Connelly
Gene Dermody
John English*
Jek Fong
Tony Galluzzo
Gary Gerber
Erika Hom
Don Jung *
Ed Lindsay

Greg Lines
Michael LoFurno
Nick Lopez
Calvin Malone
Kevin Martin*
Mike Masino
Kathy McAdams
Manfred Molt
Les Morgan
Michael Ognibene
Abraim “Alex” Ostrovskiy*
David Ranada
Erich Richter
Mike Rio*

Rochelle Robinson
Albert “Ace” Rocek
Donna Rose
Peter Runyon*
Bob Sayers
Carlis Sharpe
Dennis Spillman
Steve Swanson*
Jeroen Tan
Drew Till
Rick Van Tassell
Peter Verey
Ron Ward
Barry Webb