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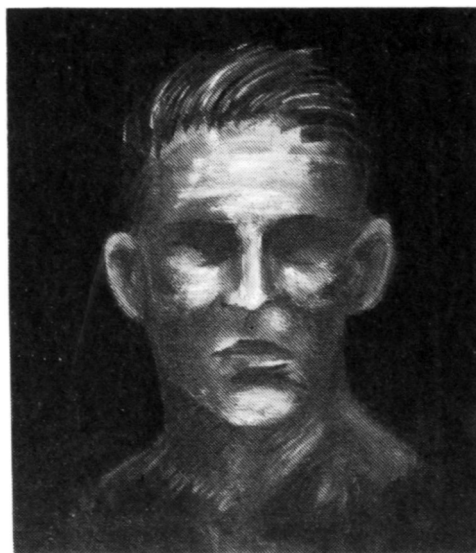
FROM BROOMCORN CHAMPION TO NATIONAL WRESTLING CHAMPION

ILLUSTRATION BY: Jim Bailey

Laurence Mantooth, Purcell, never saw a school-officiated wrestling match until he was in college. Neither can he remember a time when he didn't know how to wrestle. Growing up with three brothers made wrestling come as natural as cutting teeth -- and almost as soon.

When a lad, Mantooth took his place during harvest with 25 or 30 hired workers on his father's broomcorn farm near Wayne. He said, "We would work awhile, swim in the river, then wrestle in sand under cottonwood trees. After high school, I never lost a broomcorn match. There was only one weight. Weighing 127, I wrestled men up to 225 pounds. I won because I was in better condition."

Mantooth, OU's first gold medal-winning athlete, and national wrestling champion for 1929 and 1930, was inducted into the Helm's Foundation Wrestling Hall of Fame in 1969. Now retired, the "Scissor King" keeps fit by the same methods he practiced as a wrestler -- except the mat work-outs. He hunts and fishes near his boyhood home on the Washita River. After catching his limit of fish, he swims in the same spot. "Swimming," according to Mantooth, "made my arms, legs and back strong. I credit it with my wrestling success."



Lawrence Mantooth — National wrestling champ.

by Kate Jackson Lewis

A trick of fate kept Mantooth from wrestling at Oklahoma A&M (OSU). No recruiter knocked on his door. In his time, recruiters were a scarce breed. Too, wrestling scholarships were not offered.

Sure, Mantooth could wrestle! His skill was apparent to his Wayne high school basketball coach who urged him to go to college and wrestle. Not knowing his mat-potential, the talented athlete went out for track and basketball when he enrolled at A & M. During his freshman year, he passed by Coach Gallagher's office door every day -- never once entering. Later when Mantooth was winning His skill was apparent to his Wayne high school basketball coach who urged him to go to college and wrestle. Not knowing his

mat-potential, the talented athlete went out for track and basketball when he enrolled at A&M. During his freshman at OU, Mr. Gallagher commented, "Why did I let a man like that get away?" After one year as a spectator at all college bouts, Mantooth had an idea that he could and would -- compete the next year.

Using a new car as bait Mantooth's father suggested that his son commute from the family's new farm home near Lexington. Competing on the freshman mat team at OU he practiced two days and won a gold medal in the

125 pound class. As a sophomore, he won the starting place in his weight -- winning some and losing a few. "I lost a referee's decision in the national tournament against a man I had already defeated in conference play. That cost me a gold medal and a trip to the '28 Olympics." Mantooth lamented.

In the 1929 national tourney at Columbus, victory was sweet. "I was stretching against the ropes -- boxing ring back then -- when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I heard the great Mr. Gallagher saying, "Laurence, you can beat this man easy -- he's not in shape." One of the greatest coaches that ever lived said that to me knowing that I would face his A&M man in the finals." Mantooth won both bouts to become the first OU athlete to win a gold medal in college competition.

How did Mantooth meet living costs without a scholarship?

The greying athlete wondered how the well-supported athlete of today manages on his fare. "I worked on campus jobs for 35¢ an hour. After marrying Margaret (Beam), my high school sweetheart, we both worked at that wage. We lived in a run-down half-basement apartment with my brother, Albert, and my teammate, Marvin Leach. We four learned to live on a close budget and Margaret and I saved enough to pay her second-semester enrollment."

Mantooth said that wrestling season started for him on enrollment day. "My philosophy was that if you were in top physical condition, you had most of the battle won. Wrestling for time advantage as we did back then was a lot different from today. I believed that I could ride any man given the chance -- and could escape from any opponent within 10 seconds. I had to practice take-downs, though, and never got too good at them."

The famous athlete continued, "During my senior year all my matches went like a story book. We wrestled A&M once each year -- this year the bedlam match was held at Stillwater. The place was packed. Chairs were bunched close around a raised platform in the center of the gym. I was to wrestle Bobby Pierce, who had both high school and college wins to his credit."

The same Bobby Pierce went on to win a gold medal in the 1930 Olympics. Mr. Gallagher reported selling 600 tickets in a one-block area to Pierce's fans in Cushing. A former teammate came by my dressing room to ask me if I had been feeling well. Later I learned that he was checking on my health-condition before placing his bet. Some of the guys were offering 20 to one on Pierce. I had never heard of betting on matches. Here I was -- a country boy from the broomcorn field -- about to wrestle a veteran wrestler. Why, I had seen my first officiated match only three years ago."

Was Mantooth annihilated that night? No, according to the record, he won by a decision. After the match, his inquiring friend came by to divide his winnings with the champ.

Mantooth said, "I told him that I appreciated his offer, but could not take the money."

In the spring of '39 a common cold caused Mantooth to lose two weeks' workouts just before the national tournament. He went along to the Penn State tourney -- not to wrestle -- but to boost his team's morale. The challenge was too great -- Mantooth entered and won his second national championship. He said, "I didn't tell my competitors that I had been sick and hadn't worked out for two weeks."

When Coach Paul Keen picked the 10 "Greats" in Sooner mat-history, he told the press, "Laurence Mantooth is the greatest man I ever coached." He went on to describe the athlete's chief tactics. "Mantooth, at 126

pounds, had as his chief stock-in-trade a switch as an escape. It was impossible for an opponent to hold Mantooth down longer than 30 or 40 seconds. He had long arms that made him an effective rider. He was cautious, seldom trying for a fall or caring for one. He preferred to win by a decision rather than to take a chance."

Mantooth had this to say about Paul Keen, "He is one of the finest men that I have ever known -- a king, Christian friend. He treated you like you liked to be treated."

After college graduation, Mantooth coached wrestling, football, basketball, track, and baseball at Sulphur high school for three years. In this short time, he coached five wrestlers to national championships.

Leaving Sulphur, he operated a grocery store in Purcell until entering the Navy during World War II. From '42 to '45 Mantooth was wrestling coach in the Naval Gunnery School.

Returning to Purcell, he became active in civic affairs. His services include Board of Education, City Council for six years, Mayor of Purcell, Chamber of Commerce, and American Legion member.

During Mantooth's City Council tenure, the town installed new sewer lines, added water-well service, built a modern, fully-equipped hospital and a Multi-Purpose center.

For his outstanding service record won him the '69 "Man of the Year" award.



Former wrestling champ, Mantooth, now spends his spare time fishing and hunting

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