

GENE MILLS: THE UNCROWNED KING



Gene Mills, the greatest wrestler in Syracuse University history, rubs brother Dale's shoulders during a match.

No other human ever has equaled the performance of SU's Lord Nelson in proving he's the world's best little wrestler.

by **BOB SNYDER**

He couldn't take his eyes off the picture — the one of America's John Peterson, arm uplifted, clutching his Gold Medal.

The picture was 4 years old. Montreal, 1976.

It was supposed to be the same picture. And he was going to be in it. Moscow, 1980. Gene Mills, Gold Medal-winner.

Mills sat and stared. For 15 minutes, the greatest wrestler in Syracuse University history simply sat and stared.

No wrestler on this planet could beat him at 114.5 pounds. Now, he had been pinned by paunchy politicians in high places playing tug of war in a foreign arena.

So he struck out at Jimmy Carter's Olympic boycott, the one precipitated by Russia's invasion of Afghanistan, the one robbing him of Olympic Gold. He couldn't fight back, not in the way he knows best, by pinning his opponent.

Mills was cursing. He wanted to punch anything near him. Instead, he propelled his pint-sized body toward a set of weights. He began lifting until he knew he had to escape.

Gene Mills needed some space.

Mills' normal regimen calls for pre-season weight lifting to increase strength. He lifts during the season to improve muscle tone. This time, Mills lifted to forget. It didn't work.

The memory of that day last year when he had to accept defeat — a defeat not rendered on the world mat — cannot be forgotten. By Mills and hundreds of other U.S. amateur athletes who earned Olympic berths, including Baldwinsville's middle-distance runner Don Paige.

Mills delayed his senior year on the Hill because of a quest for Gold. Behind him was a National Championship (1979) and three Eastern crowns ('77-78-79), all in the 118-pound class.

He'd been an All-American each season as a collegian. His victories exceed 120, more than 100 by pins.

The titles continue this winter, as the 22-year-old senior from Pompton Lakes, N.J., awaits the start of this week's NCAAs at Princeton.

Still, Mills — on the verge of surpassing the NCAA career pin record of Clarion State's Wade Schalles (102) at the time of this writing — has not changed his life's primary objective: Olympic Gold.

Only time and place have changed — to Los Angeles, summer of '84 and the next Olympiad.

To almost everyone who knows anything about wrestling across the globe, Mills is the uncrowned king. A ruler without his throne. A champion unequaled. He is the only wrestler in history to score a perfect mark in winning a 23-year-old Russian tournament of the world's elite.

To his SU mentor, Ed Carlin, Gene Mills is the greatest he's ever coached, makes moves no one else can and has tremendous confidence and determination.

To his mother, Barbara, the bantam grappler is an egomaniac in the most positive sense, one driven by an obsession to be the best.

To his brother, Dale, Gene is the most confident person he's ever seen, who does everything he says he will.

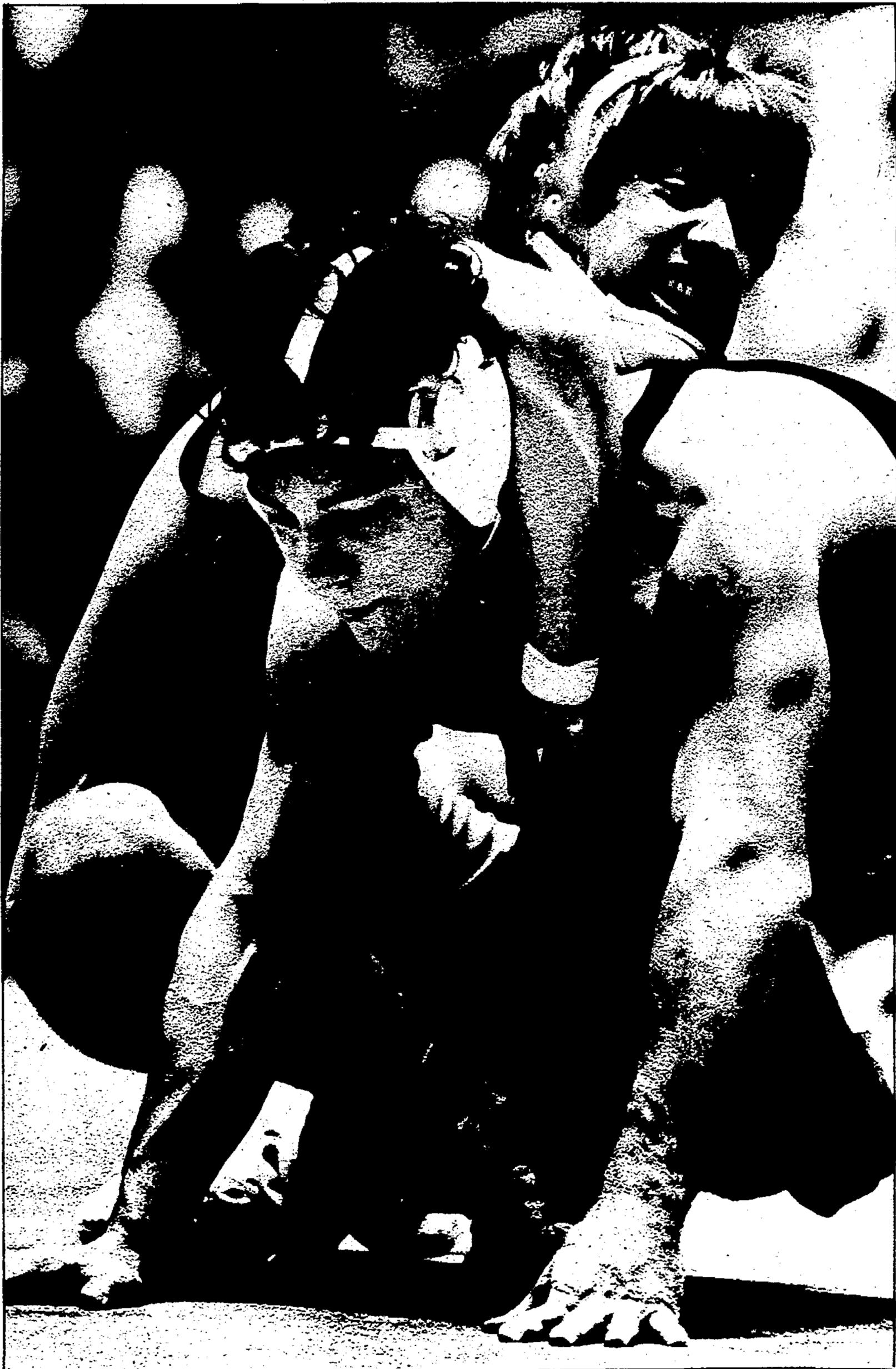
To his sister, Lara, probably his greatest fan, he's not an idol, just a brother.

To his girl friend, Mary Kearney, Gene is the eternal optimist.

To his father, Eugene, he's a Felix Unger around the house, a very methodical person.

To his Olympic coach, Stan Dziedzic, Mills is the smartest wrestler in the nation, whose mental capacity is his greatest attribute.

continued on page 6



"Take the all-time pin record. I don't just want to break it, I want to break it so it'll never be broken in the future."



Gene Mills, top, pins yet another opponent. At right, he strolls through campus wearing the jacket that accompanies him on world wrestling matches.

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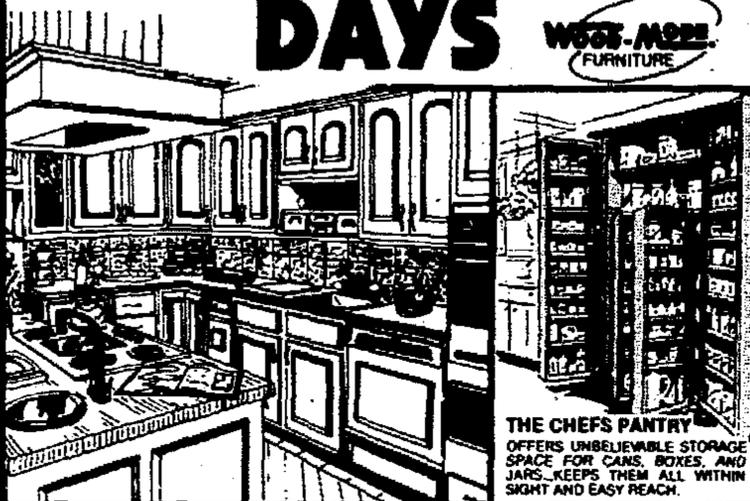
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The Uncrowned King



Mills wrestles with a lamp while watching TV with teammate Gary Siegel.

And to Gene Mills, Gene Mills is a 5-foot, 5-inch, 118-pounder (his collegiate weight class), an explosive energy force bigger than height and weight figures, a Jekyll and Hyde with a compulsion to possess an Olympic Gold Medal.

"When Gene says it, he does it," exclaims Dale Mills, who is both brother and SU teammate. Living in the shadow of a family member isn't easy. Rooming with him can be stickier yet.

Dale has handled it well. A highly regarded sophomore, Dale followed in his brother's footsteps by winning the Easterns as a rookie 118-pounder. This year, he's been up a weight class after Gene's early-season experiment at 126.

"Gene's the most confident person I've ever seen. He's the best wrestler in the world," declares Dale. "I didn't think we'd get along, particularly rooming together. And he does get me ticked off when he beats me."

"I can't really accept that. But I'm gonna have to."

Dale does gain the upper hand, sort of. "When we go on the mat, I get the first takedown a lot of times. That's about it. And sometimes, he lets me do things to give me confidence."

"He taught me the half-nelson (Gene's most punishing hold) ... I think I can wrestle like him," says the last of the wrestling Mills brothers (middle brother Wayne used to be Montclair State's 118-pounder).

"Gene kind of got me the full ride here," Dale adds. "In my mind, he won the Gold Medal in the Olympics."

What separates Mills from the rest of the world's lightweights?

"Uncanny balance," suggests Carlin. "He hits moves from positions other wrestlers can't duplicate. But the two biggest things are he believes in himself fully and he works like hell."

"I used to think (ex-NCAA king and grid fullback) Jim Nance was the greatest I ever had here. Then Gene came along."

"Our first match was against Rhode Island and he did a good job on a two-time state champ," recalls the veteran coach of the nationally ranked Orangemen. "I wondered if

maybe he was better than I'd thought. He kept doing it and I wondered if he was that good or just lucky. Even after his first year (third in the Nationals), I never thought he'd go as far as he's gone."

"But he's the best I've ever coached," declares Carlin.

Dziedzic labels Mills "the most talented wrestler in the country when it comes to mental capabilities. It must be his mental toughness that allows him to go longer."

"Physically, he's long for his weight class." America's Olympic coach hopes Mills can make weight at 114.5 for '84. There's a two kilogram allowance in international wrestling, allowing Mills to weigh-in at 119. Not so in the Olympics, where he must make a flat 114.5 or try for a berth at 125.5.

"In our four-year plan for Los Angeles, for us to beat the Russians, we've got to get a medal at 114.5," Dziedzic emphasizes. "If Gene can discipline himself to stay at that weight, there's no doubt he'll be a Gold Medalist. And today, he wouldn't be a contender at 125.5."

"But you can't tell what might happen between now and '84."

Mills doesn't feel he can ever make 114.5 again. Yet, he is sure he'll clutch Gold in L.A.

"I beat our Olympian at 125.5 (John Azevedo) in last year's National AAUs," Mills says, defending his belief he'll be America's 125.5-pounder in '84.

Barbara Mills (like her husband, a telephone company employee of New Jersey Bell), describes her world-famous son this way:

"He's cockier than Dale. Gene's definitely an egomaniac. An egomaniac in the most productive way, a way that drives him. When he comes home Christmas, he wants to go down and wrestle."

Regarding the boycott, Mrs. Mills remarks, "Gene thought all along they (America) would go to the Olympics. I was trying to prepare him for the worst."

And what if the worst happens in L.A.? What if Gene Mills doesn't win the Gold?

"I might not allow myself to think about it," Gene's mother says. "I would hate to think what it would do to him."

The world's greatest lightweight wrestler isn't one-dimensional. It just appears that way when he steps on the mat.

Eugene Mills bursts with pride over his son's world-wide success. "I feel terrific about it. I'm blown up like a balloon, like any good father should be. Why, when I'm walking down the street in town, I'm Gene Mills' father. I'm not Gene Mills.

"I wrestled in high school and was an Eighth Army champ at 132. I loved it," adds Gene's father. "I kept pushing Gene, taught him everything I knew and he went on and learned a lot more ... Everything I did was wrestling and wrestling is his life, too.

"He would have won it (the Olympics), but other circumstances circumvented that. I'm sure he'll keep on going until he wins his Gold in '84. What else is there? I mean, for an amateur wrestler, the only other thing is coaching.

"Around the house," Mills' father says, "Gene's like a Felix Unger, someone who picks up around and is very methodical. When he does things he does them all out. He doesn't like to play second best. He was always like that, in everything. You ought to play him in ping-pong.

"Gene likes write-ups, likes to be in the limelight," his father adds. "His success is a combination of psychological and physical ability. He excels because he wants to be good. He's physical when he has to be, but he's not what you'd call strong, not like a Charles Atlas ... I think his mind is the strongest part of him."

Mary Kearney, his high school sweetheart and a senior at Holy Name Hospital School of Nursing in Teaneck, N.J., didn't know Gene was a wrestler when she started going out with him. They met Oct. 1, 1974, at a football game when she was 15 and he was 16.

"He's always happy. He's the optimist and I'm the pessimist. Since high school, he's be-

continued on page 6



Sister Lara gets a chuckle out of Gene at a match.

"People here say you can't throw it (the half-nelson) from the knees ... But I pinned all three Olympic place-winners with it."

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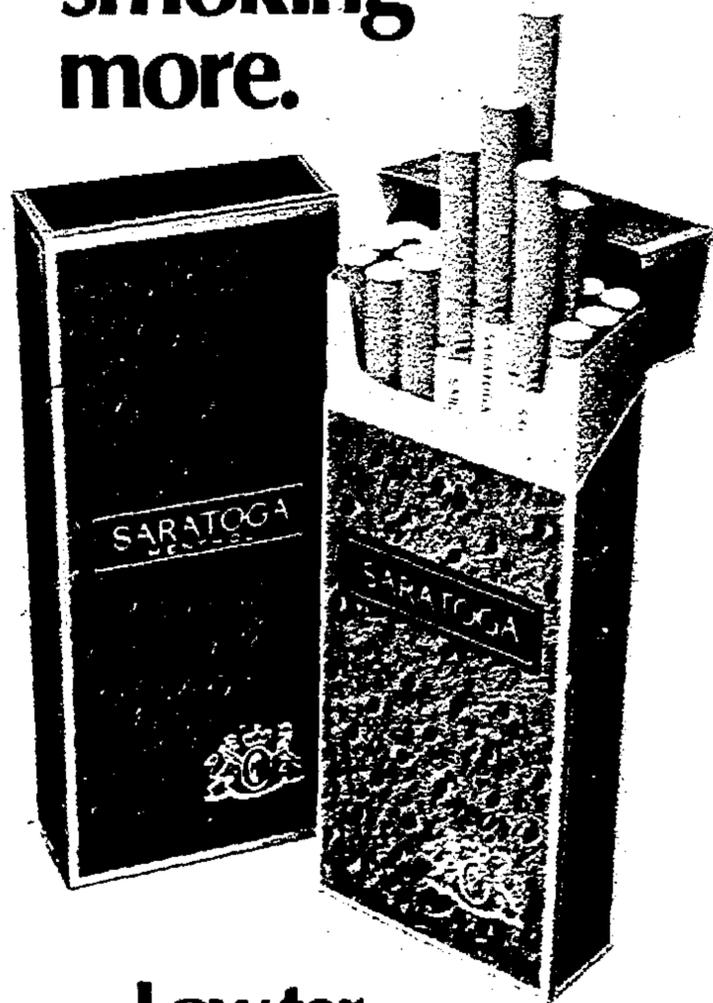
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The Uncrowned King



Mark Iacovelli, another wrestler, and Mills cram for an exam.

come a lot more determined, a lot more aggressive. I guess he's always wanted to do the best at everything he does. His father was a wrestler when he was younger and that has had a lot to do with it."

Gene Mills accomplished what no other human has done since the Russians' renowned Tbilisi Tournament began in '58. He had no bad marks, meaning he defeated all eight foes by 12 or more points. He pinned seven of his victims.

For the uninitiated in wrestling or those whose knowledge is limited to the professional grunt and groan TV shows, a pin is scored when a contestant defeats an opponent by forcing his shoulders to the mat. Team points are scored: six for a pin; five for a super-superior decision, winning by 12 or more; four for a superior decision, winning by eight or more; three for a decision, winning by no more than seven.

Mills recalls his one non-pin at Tbilisi. "The guy I didn't pin I had, 18-0, with three minutes to go. They disqualified him."

To the average sports buff, Tbilisi is another mispronounced place on the map. To wrestling's elite, it's where the cream of the crop meet annually to do battle.

"We have more Olympic champions than Tbilisi champions," says Mills, punctuating the stature of the Soviet-hosted tourney.

International competition began for Mills before Tbilisi. Lady Luck played her role.

Coach Dziedzic recalls Mills' good fortune.

"I'd seen Gene and picked him to go against the Russians in Wilkes-Barre in '78. He got beat, but eventually beat the guy in Japan.

"The New York Athletic Club (coached by SU mat product Sonny Greenhalgh) gave Gene support," says Dziedzic, who can be expected to steer the U.S. team in '84. "He really made the '79 Pan-American team by default, because the 1977 NCAA champ, Jim Haines, beat him, then was a no-show for a wrestle-off at camp."

"But I won the World Championships in San Diego (summer '79). So they asked me to wrestle in the World Cup in Toledo ... I won that, made the Olympic Team and made a second visit to Japan," says Mills, not wanting to leave anyone with an impression Haines is his superior.

In the Pan-Ams, No. 3 in the '78 World Championships went on his back. "One down, two to go," thought Mills, who always thinks pin.

At the World Super Champion Title Match in Japan, Mills pinned his Russian opponent. He lost, 19-15, to the '76 Olympic champ. "But nobody had ever scored five or more points on him before," recounts Mills, his immense pride showing.

No. 2 in the '78 World Championships was humiliated by Mills, 25-7. "I should have beat that Jap," Mills says of No. 1. "But he retired."

Then, Mills rolled through Tbilisi and won the World Cup.

Moscow was next. But not for Gene Mills and others who devoted their lives to winning the boycotted Olympics.

Mills nearly didn't wrestle for Syracuse, either. "I wanted most to go to Clarion, but they wouldn't offer me anything," he says.

"I was 108 in high school, and not a big 108-pounder either. They (collegiate mat powers) didn't think I was big enough. I could only bench-press 100 pounds; now I do between 180 and 200.

"Montclair was 15 minutes from home, but the coach left to go to Louisiana State University (which entered the recruiting picture after Mills signed with SU). Syracuse offered me a half-ride. The most I could pay was \$1,200.

"Coach Carlin and I went back and forth and finally agreed. After my freshman year, when I was 24-1 and won the Easterns, they gave me the full scholarship. I ended up paying \$300. Not a bad investment for five years," concedes Mills, a psychology major whose program emphasis is in the sports field.

Carlin recalls Mills as a puny high school senior. "He was 108, but he had to eat up to it. I was concerned about his size," admits Carlin. "We had two guys who were 118-pounders in high school, who couldn't make that weight in college. We ended up forfeiting matches.

"I wanted someone who could make weight, someone who'd be there."

Mills has been there since coming to SU in '76, although he took a season-opening fling this year at 126. Losing in the Great Plains Open changed his mind.

Next year, Mills plans to work on his master's in physical education. He'd like to do some college coaching — until '84, LA and Gold.

Now, a normal day goes this way for the world's best little matman. "I get up and go to two classes, eat, then run. I run three miles a day; I have to run all the time to make weight. More and more, weight is a pain in the butt for me," Mills admits.

"Then I go a half-hour early to drill before practice. After practice I have two night classes and then, I like to work out a little more."

The mini-matman's first tutor was his father. Eugene Mills would work with him, but insisted he'd have to drill every night if he wanted to be great. Gene decided he wanted to be the best.

"My father beat me mentally while I worked, and physically if I didn't."

But he admits the biggest impressions have been made by Dziejic and Hamad Kermanshah, Iran's three-time World Champion serving as Carlin's expert on technique.

Pinning people always has been Mills' forte. "But Stan did a lot with me on my feet. He's one of the best clinicians I ever saw," says Mills. "And Hamad's world-class experience has helped, too."

Wrestling clinics are always after Mills to demonstrate his trademark — a half-nelson from the kneeling position. Some SU personnel aren't enthralled with the move; Mills is.

"You use the hold when you're on top, weight forward," he says. "People here say you can't throw it from the knees ... And yet I teach it at Olympic camps and clinics. Internationally, they all know I do it. But I pinned all three Olympic place-winners with it."

"When I become a coach, my team's gonna use it. You can be sure of that," insists Mills, who never lost a collegiate regular-season dual match.

"He was one of the few kids in the second grade who loved girls," confesses Barbara Mills.

His passions travel other roads ... A beer, when not in training. Italian food, particularly that prepared by Fannie Pagano, Gene's grandmother. "She makes the best eggplant parmigiana in the world," suggests Dale Mills. "And Gene can't go a day without ice cream."

Mills is a young man possessed. His obsession with winning in LA is matched by an inner drive to succeed, a characteristic he's had for a long time.

"When you're growing up, you win the States in high school. Then come the NAAs in college. And then there's the North American Championships. And the World Cup and Tbilisi. They're big deals."

"But the Olympics is the big thing ... I haven't fulfilled what I want to do."

"Take the all-time pin record. I don't just want to break it, I want to break it so it'll never be broken in the future."



Gene Mills stands as champion and first wrestler ever to win the famed Tbilisi Tournament in Russia without one bad mark.

He likes rock star Bruce "The Boss" Springsteen. "Rock, disco, it depends on the song. I just like listening to something fast. A lot of the guys bring cassettes or we listen to an AM-FM radio."

"But all the time, I'm waiting for my next match."

Eugene and Barbara Mills attend most of SU's matches. Lara, already a promising gymnast at 10, is there, too, rooting for her brothers. Usually she wears a gift from her mother — a warmup suit that says "Mat Brat" on the back.

Before a match, Lara's superstar goes through a ritual. He's done it for years. "I count the stars on the flag during the playing of The Star Spangled Banner ... You've got to have your mind on something," he says.

On the mat, there can be no relaxation.

When he was a kid, Mills played baseball and football. "Size wasn't on my side. I'm 5-foot-5. But I know I'm bigger," says Mills, who — barring injury — should become SU's second two-time national champ (Nance was heavyweight king in '63 and '65).

In an era of inflated salaries paid to professional athletes, is Mills envious?

"First of all, professional wrestling is bull(bleep). But as far as other pro athletes, they can't accomplish victory without other people."

"I'd rather be a wrestler (amateur, that is). I do everything on my own ... And it takes more talent. You make a lot more sacrifices, a lot more."

Even relaxing is somewhat foreign to this blond-haired bundle of energy and muscle, whose mustache doesn't disguise a baby face. But Mills enjoys listening to music.

"It's happened before that I've relaxed and been beaten. I know I can't relax any more."



Photo by John Nicoles

SU products Joe Ingrassia, New York Athletic Club president, left, and Sonny Greenhalgh, club wrestling chairman, honor Mills as "Athlete of the Year."

"Off the mat, I'm a happy-go-lucky fella. But I'm really a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. On the mat, I change my whole outlook."

"When you're wrestling, you're not out there to be a nice guy ... I want to kill the person I'm wrestling. Not literally, not to hurt the guy."

"But I never had the killer instinct

in the first period. I used to get taken down and fall behind. Now," he says, "I've got that killer instinct."

And when will that wane? When will Gene Mills pack his wrestling tights for the last time?

Barbara Mills wonders, too. "I don't think he's going to get off the mat until he's too old," she says.



Mills jogs a lot to keep his weight down for the '84 Olympics. With him is Dave Jacobs, former SU football kicker bound for Cleveland.