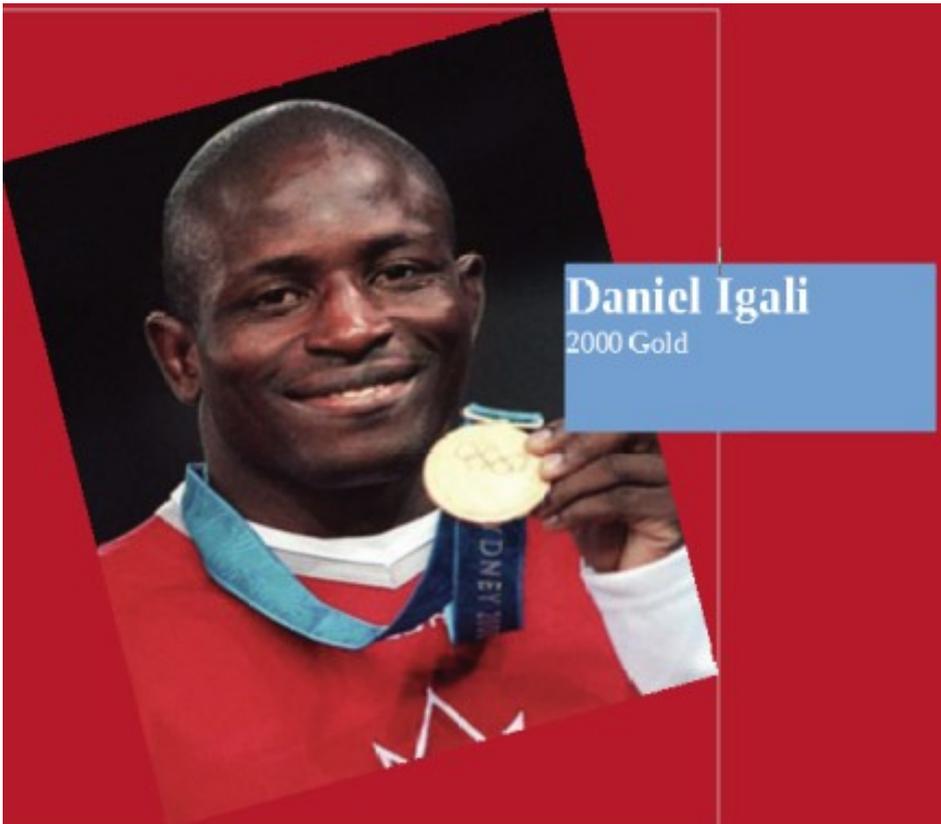

MY OLYMPIC EXPERIENCE

Graeme Cameron
memories of Sydney 2000

Part 3: Memorable Moments

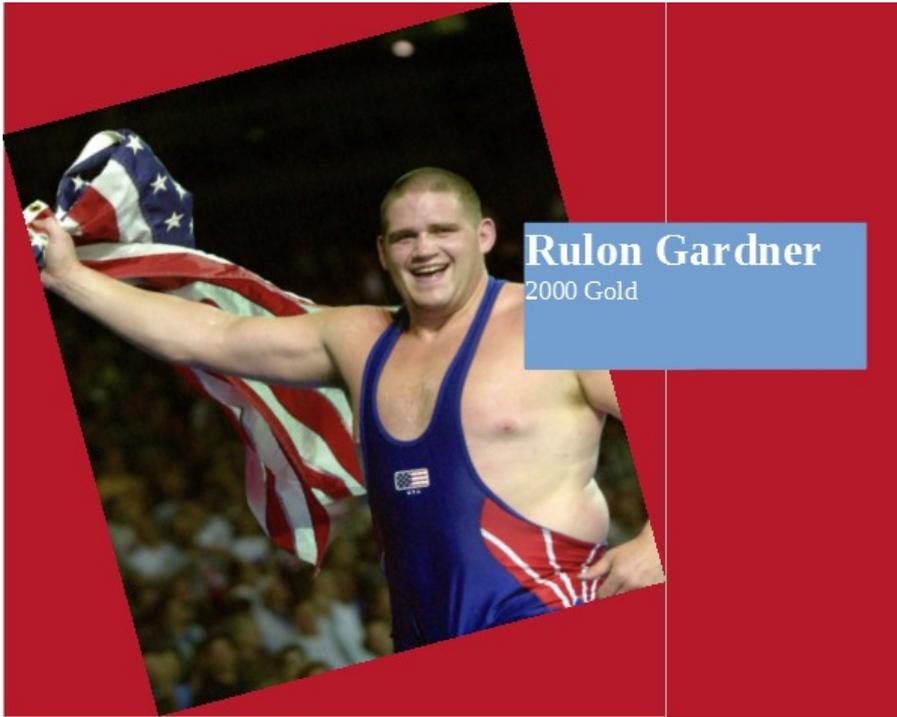


In every Olympic event there are memorable moments. In the wrestling event Azerbaijan won their first ever gold medal and Uzbekistan and Macedonia their first ever medals (bronze) as independent nations (Azerbaijan have gone on to become one of the top three nations in freestyle wrestling, alongside Russia and Iran). In the freestyle competition, Nigerian-born Canadian Daniel Igali won that country's first gold medal in many years. An orphan adopted by Canadian parents, Igali collected

gold medals at the World Championships, Olympics and Commonwealth Games. He returned to the land of his birth, becoming their national coach and establishing Nigeria as one of the top wrestling nations in Africa and the British Commonwealth.

But for me there were two moments which stood out, one historic, the other personal

THE HISTORIC



To say Alexandre Karelin was the hot favourite to win the gold medal in the heavyweight division of the Greco-Roman section would be the understatement of the century. Karelin was undefeated in international competition for over 12 years and won the previous three Olympic gold medals as well as seven world championship gold medals. He was attempting to win his fourth straight gold medal, something never before achieved (a few had tried before him but fell at the

final hurdle). If Karelin lost, it would be his first ever loss in international competition. Either way, something historic was about to happen

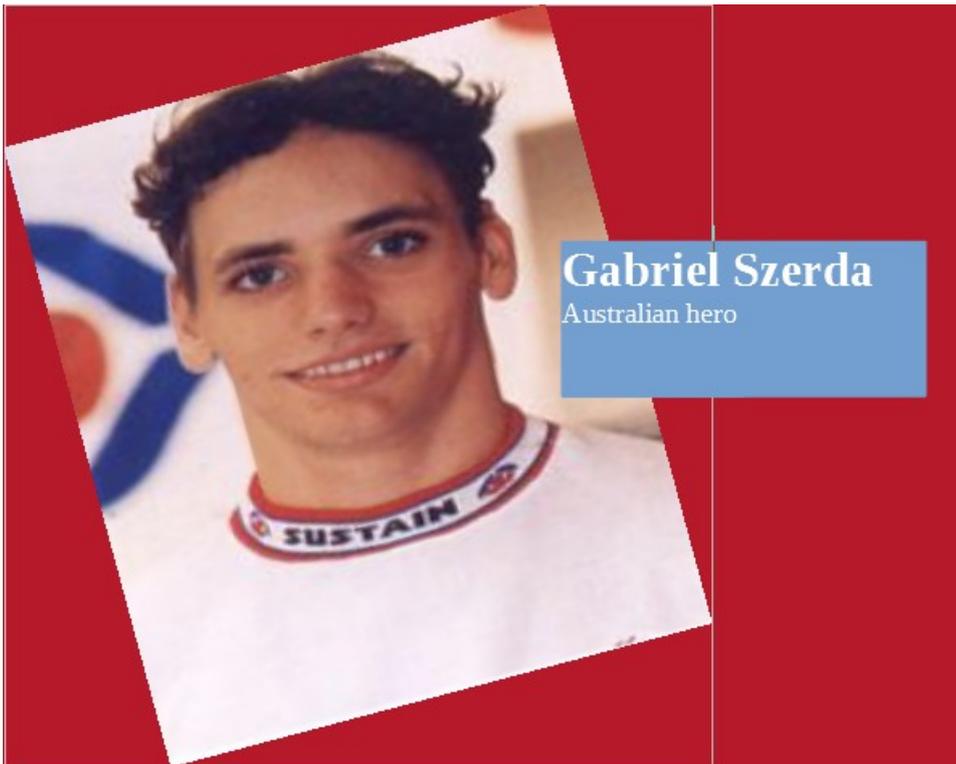
His opponent was Rulon Gardner, a country boy from America, competing in his first Olympics. By all reports Gardner had scraped into the USA team after several close calls. After two comfortable wins, in the group stage he struggled to a one point win against Italian Guiseppe Guita, which earned him a bye to the semi-final where he again won by one point against Dimitri Delbelka of Belarus

On paper, Karelin looked a certainty. However, as we all know matches are not won on paper. To everyone's surprise, Gardner put up sterling resistance, the first round ending 0-0. Now the rules of the time dictated that should the first round end scoreless, a special coin (red on one side, blue on the other) should be flipped and the winner could then get the advantage by wrapping his arms around his opponent's body. That wrestler then had one minute to score or forfeit a point to the opponent. The defending wrestler could also score by breaking the opponent's grip. This was to become key in the final outcome.

Karelin won the toss. Surely he couldn't be denied now. The referee blew his whistle, they struggled. And then it happened. I didn't actually see it but someone in front of me turned and said "Karelin's grip broke!" Officials reviewed the video (we've had VAR in amateur wrestling for three decades) and confirmed it. One point to Gardner. Gardner defended desperately for the rest of match as Karelin mounted attack after attack to no avail. The hooter sounded. A win to Gardner 1-0, the greatest upset in the history of amateur wrestling. American fans went wild. History had been made and I was there to see it.

Things were still buzzing when I went back to work. I was up a stepladder, taking down the display sheets for the Greco-Roman weight class so that we could put the freestyle ones up when the Americans I had invited to bet against Karelin walked by. "Bet you wish you'd taken that bet," I called out. Raucous laughter followed. I had offers of cash for the heavyweight sheet but it wasn't mine to sell. Oh well.

THE PERSONAL



Gabriel Szerda
Australian hero

Thing had not gone well for the Australian team. In fact, we hadn't won a single match. Then Gabriel Szerda stepped onto the mat for his group stage match against Canada's Dean Schmeichel

I knew "Gabby" (as we all called him) very well and the name was apt. In fact, over a decade before a 10 year old boy who spoke little English walked into my training session with his father (who

as yet spoke no English) looking for a place to continue his interest in wrestling. I coached Gabby from the age of ten to fourteen. I came to know the Szerda family very well and helped them settle in, often with Gabby acting as interpreter. I was invited into their home many times. He was a very talkative child and we had many conversations in fractured English.

Little did I know what I had. In his very first match, competing in borrowed, ill-fitting gear, he defeated the state champion by one point. He was not only a talented athlete but was highly intelligent, mastering English and qualifying at high school for the intellectually gifted less than three years after arriving with no English. I knew I had something special here. He was also the most determined and ambitious lad I've trained. At age 11, he announced that he wanted to go to the Olympics and worked towards that goal. At age 14, I handed him on to those more qualified than me to help him achieve his goal and advised him that he would need to go overseas to do so

So here we were over a decade later. As I watched Gabby enter the hall for his first match I was happy for him that he had achieved his Olympic dream and felt an overwhelming sense of pride that I had played a part in making that happen.

The draw was not kind but Gabby gave a good account of himself against more matured and experienced competitors. He went down 3-0 to 1999 World Championship bronze medallist Marek Garmulwicz of Poland and 7-0 to the Ukraine's Aleksandr Shemarov. Then came his final group match against Canada's Dean Schmeichel. It was apparent from the outset that the two were evenly matched and it was a tight contest, with Schmeichel taking the lead at the half way point. In the latter stages of the match the Canadian began to tire and Gabby took the lead with less than a minute to go, winning 4-2. All the Aussies watching erupted. The drought had been broken. You would have thought he'd won a medal. I was able to get close to pat him on the shoulder and say well

done as he was hurried out for a drug test. I saw his family in the stand and went to them. Smiles, hugs and congratulations all round and then it was back to work.

As it turned out, that was to be the only highlight of the competition for the Australian wrestling team. After it was all over, I went and talked to Gabby about the Commonwealth Games in two years only to get a shock. Despite only being in his early twenties, he was retiring from the sport. While training in Colorado he had met a local girl and fallen head over heels. She didn't like the heat in Australia, so the plan was for Gabby to finish his university degree in Australia, then get married in America. I pointed out to him that he would be the favourite for the gold medal, having just beaten his main rival but his mind was made up. He felt that he had made enough sacrifices and put his life on hold for long enough. He had achieved his goal and wanted to move on and make a new life. What can you do? I knew him well enough to know that once he had made up his mind, there was no changing it, plus you can't really stand in the way of young love.. I wished him well and we parted ways. I never saw him again, though I did see his parents once as I happened to be passing by their house and just dropped in. By the way, Dean Scmeichel did win the gold medal in the next Commonwealth Games with no real opposition. What might have been

At the conclusion of the freestyle event, I placed some boxes of copies of the results at various stages at the door with sign that said "help yourself", the people fling out did. I had taken a few for myself and there was little left after everyone had gone. After wrapping things up and saying my goodbyes, I had an hour to get home to watch the closing ceremony and only just made it

It has been 20 years since the Sydney Olympics. I began writing these pieces on the day of the opening ceremony and am finishing on the weekend of the closing ceremony. No volunteers reunion was possible due to the pandemic, although I believe there were some small group gatherings.

If you're ever in Sydney, go to Olympic Park. Outside the main stadium, there's a forest of poles with the names of every one of the 40,000 volunteers who took part in the Games (including me). I know that seven of the specialist wrestling volunteer team have since passed away. They were people I knew well.

My lasting memory of the Games is that I don't ever remember working so hard but having so much fun. I hope I get the chance to do it again one day.

Graeme Cameron