

FEB/MARCH 97

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EUROPE

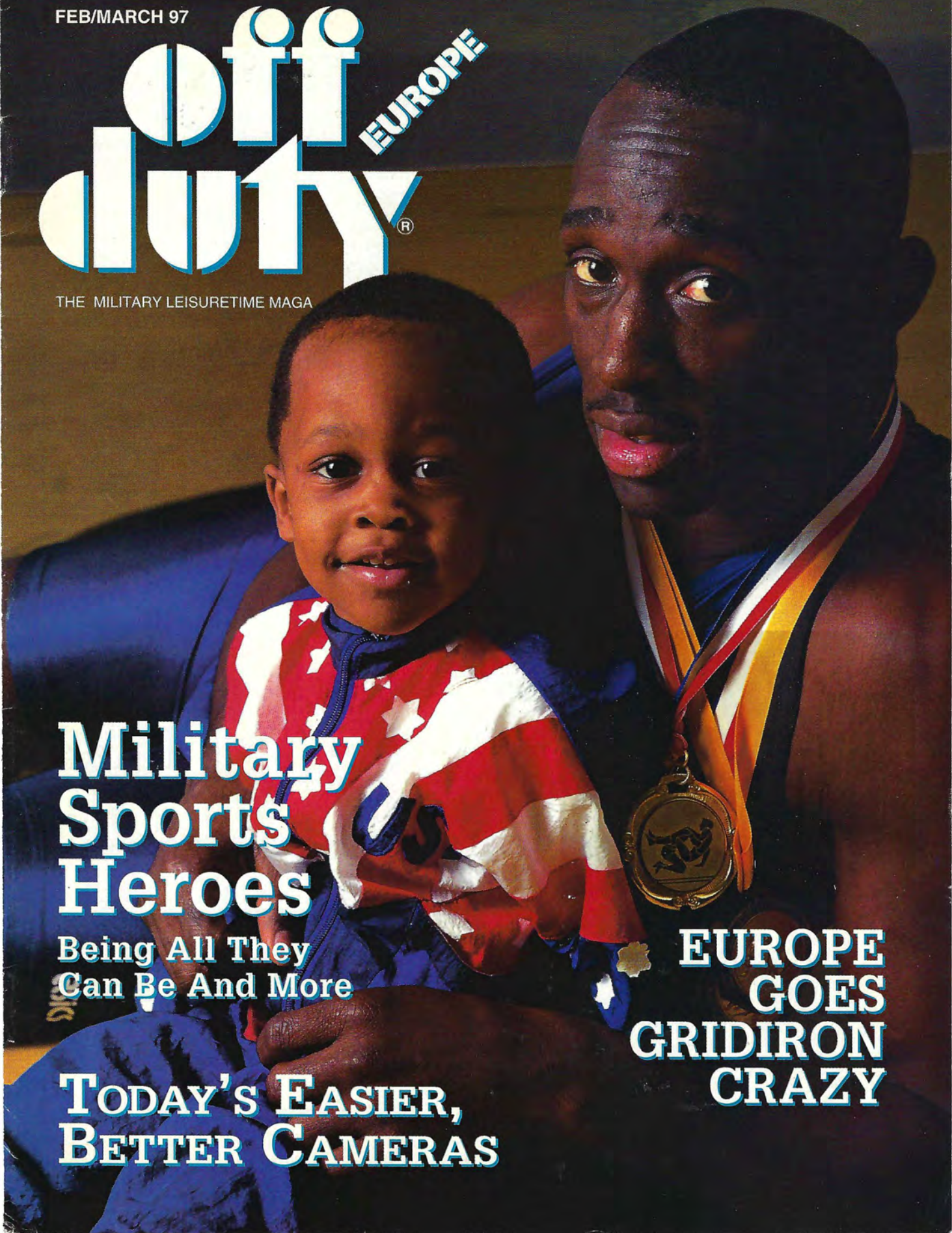
THE MILITARY LEISURETIME MAGAZINE

## Military Sports Heroes

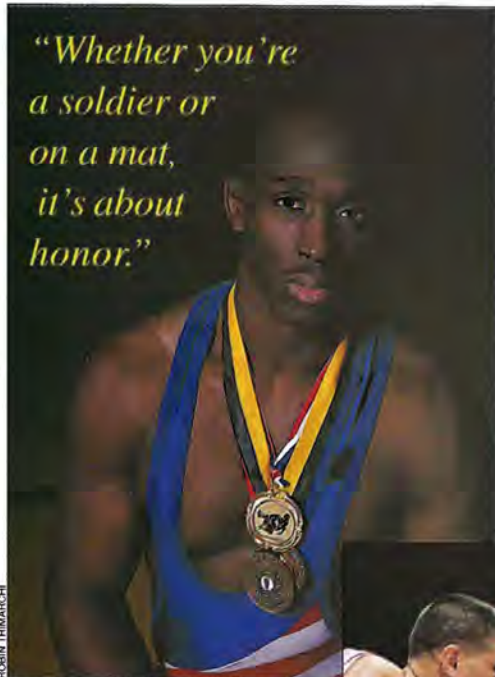
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*"Whether you're  
a soldier or  
on a mat,  
it's about  
honor."*



ROBIN TRIMARCH

# ABOVE AND Beyond

BY ERIC MINTON



ARMED FORCES SPORTS COUNCIL

It's unmistakably Army. The classroom in the otherwise deserted dormitory in a remote sector of Fort Benning, Georgia, has faded vanilla walls bearing starkly stenciled messages. The words, however, aren't typical military jargon: "Army Olympic & World Medalists," "World Greco-Roman Champions" and "Olympic Champions."

This old classroom is now a gym, with wall-to-wall mats on the floor, stationary bikes, Stairmasters and barbells on the lecturer's stage, plus a prevailing musk-and-sweat odor. Mannequins in wrestling tights poised to do Greco-Roman battle hang from the ceiling, suggesting who uses this room. Yet, despite the location of this makeshift gym, it is a special place, as those words on the walls attest. World champions call these mats home.

Working out with the Army wrestlers this morning is Volnick, a World Cup wrestler who dropped in for a couple of weeks before heading home to Moscow. Zach, a high school kid from Macon, Georgia,

with a bright blond shock of hair spilling over his forehead, goes head-to-head with Spc. Miguel

Spencer, ranked sixth in the nation in his 163-pound weight class. Assistant Coach Anatoliy Nazarenko gives instructions in the heavy accent of his native Kazakhstan, having lived in the U.S. for less than a year, all of that at Fort Benning. The head coach is an Olympian, SSgt. Derrick Waldroup.

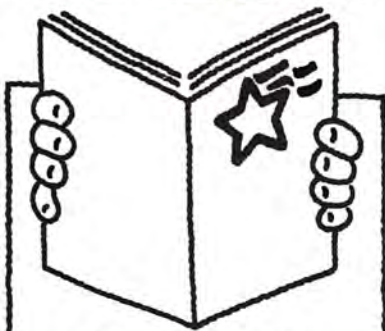
Like a montage, this scene encapsulates the world of America's military athletes. They train in near isolation from their comrades in arms with limited support from the Pentagon. Still, they maintain themselves as soldiers, sailors and airmen, precariously balancing athletic and military careers the same way Coach Waldroup and his OIC, heavyweight Capt. Jeff Green, toe the fine line between rank protocol and coaching prerogatives. In the military's role as "peace keepers," these may be the

ultimate warriors forging friendships through sports. They serve as emissaries to America's youths, inspiring them to stay off drugs, stay in school, go to college and even pursue military careers. And on world stages, they battle heroically to represent their country with honor.

Waldroup limps down the hall from the wrestling room to his office. Six weeks before, he had surgery on his hip to correct damage from a dislocation. "I don't even know when I did it," he says of the original injury. That's because he never let up in training or competition, finally going under the surgeon's knife after retiring.

His retirement was from 20 years of wrestling competition. He still has eight more years before reaching 20 in the Army. Though his MOS is communications (wire systems installer), Waldroup's current assignment is head coach of the Army's wrestling team. He comes to the job with good credentials. He finished seventh in Greco-Roman at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, won a bronze medal at the 1996 U.S. National

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Greco-Roman Wrestling Championships, and is the all-time winningest Army wrestler with 17 Armed Forces Gold Medals. He earned the Meritorious Service Medal for his Olympic performance, which joins three good conduct medals, two Army commendation medals, and two NCO professional development ribbons, among others, on his chest.

"My finest moment in sports?"

He picks up a much-handled newspaper clipping. It shows Waldroup blowing kisses to the

Olympic crowd, his shoes sitting behind him in the center of the mat covered with a black hanky, the gesture of a wrestler who has met his last match.

"It was the closing page of 20 years of hard work," he says. "I was often written off as too old or not good enough to make the Olympic team. I made it. I didn't win a medal (he finished the Olympics with a 5-2 record), but I can retire at peace."

Waldroup has already set new goals for the rest of his military career. But unlike most of his colleagues hoping to make sergeant major—"Which would be slim because I've been working outside my duty class," he says—Waldroup's goals still center on his sport. He wants to put five athletes on the 2000 Olympic team and win two medals.

"I'd like my mission to be to start building the Army's athletic program into the best in the world, like Russia or Bulgaria," Waldroup says. "If we're truly the best army in the world, we should have the best athletes in the world."

Upon reaching 20 years in the Army, Waldroup intends to see U.S. soldiers earning no less than five gold medals in every sport at the Sydney Olympic games. The Army, however, doesn't necessarily share

his aspirations, says Waldroup. "If you ask the military what is my mission, it's to defend my country."

Just as Navy Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Elizabeth Evans began to rise in the ranks of tae kwan do tournaments, something sidelined her from training and competition: the Persian Gulf War. "I was getting good then, but I had to cut out all

*Dave DeGraaf's Air Force work ethic also makes him a world-class team handball player.*



PERRY MCINTYRE, JR./USA TEAM HANDBALL



CARLOS BAKER/USAF

my training and do my duty," says Evans, who served in the Gulf.

But the detour didn't hurt her athletic career for long. The lightweight (121-132 pounds) is the reigning U.S. National Champion, the 1996 World Cup champion, the 1996 National Team Trials gold medalist, and the 1996 Pan American Champion. Her sights are set on Sydney in 2000, where tae kwan do becomes an Olympic medal sport for the first time.

"As long as I stay healthy and

my command doesn't have any problem with me training, I know I'll make the team," says Evans, who just PCSed to Pearl Harbor.

She learned tae kwan do nine years ago from her husband, Troy, a hospital corpsman who teaches the sport. She gained international clout after hooking up with the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, where she spends a month with the national team prior to competitions. So far, her Navy superiors have supported her athletic endeavors.

"As long as I can train in tae kwan do, then I'll be happy taking care of the Navy thing," says Evans, whose primary goal is to make senior chief, tae kwan do or not. "If my command says 'you can't do tae kwan do because we need you here,' then I won't be happy. I know there's no place in the world where they can't spare one corpsman."

The DoD supports military members with Olympic potential through the World Class Athlete Program, which assigns selected athletes to

duty stations where they can more easily pursue athletic training. However, the military establishment also demands that these athletes fulfill all service obligations and make rank on time. The military culture can often also frown on members sidetracked from their duties by sports.

"The Army's motto is 'Be all you can be,'" says Waldroup. "If you can be the best soldier in the Army and the best wrestler in the world, why shouldn't you?"

**A**ir Force 1st Lt. Dave DeGraaf was using the restroom during the Atlanta Olympics when President Clinton walked in. "How you doing, Mr. President?" DeGraaf greeted his commander-in-chief, who replied cordially. The meeting was one of DeGraaf's Olympic highlights, though his big moment came when he scored the game-winning goal in overtime against Algeria to give the U.S. its best Olympic finish ever in team handball (ninth). DeGraaf also set U.S. Olympic records with 13

goals and seven blocked shots against Kuwait.

Colleges recruited DeGraaf for his football and basketball skills but, "fortunately for me, neither one of those worked out," he says. As an Air Force Academy cadet, he took up team handball and now plays for the national team based in Atlanta, where he serves as a test control officer at the Atlanta Military Entrance Processing Station.

Integral to his athletic success has been his military training. "We're not as experienced as European teams, but we don't quit," says DeGraaf of his team, which also stars Army 1st Lt. Michael Thornberry. "That's true of the U.S. military. We don't quit. That's the attitude we have." He also says the military experience helps him focus on his game and maintain a disciplined lifestyle that ultimately helps the team.

Evans agrees. "The coaches on the national team, where everybody else is civilian, wish the other members were like me. I don't complain

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about anything, I'm always on time, I keep my room clean," square-cornered bed and all. Though tae kwan do is all about discipline, Evans says, "The Navy gives you more."

And the military athlete often gives more back. Waldroup says his wrestlers consistently score near the top of their classes in military courses. DeGraaf is quick to assert that his athlete career "is a very good representation of the Air Force."

Most famous military athletes are stars who went on to stellar pro athletic careers rather than staying in the service. Boston Celtic Hall of Famer K.C. Jones was in the Army when his Olympic basketball team won gold in 1956. Hall of Fame Dallas Cowboy quarterback Roger Staubach and current NBA All-Star David Robinson of the San Antonio Spurs fulfilled their military obligations after graduating from Annapolis, then began pro careers. Champion boxer Leon Spinks was a Marine, Ray Mercer was in the Army,

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## International basketball star and Army reservist Ruthie Bolton tasted gold in Atlanta.

before turning pro.

Another who may join that impressive list is 1st Lt. Ruthie Bolton, a transportation specialist in the Army Reserve. A starter for the '96 Olympic gold-medal-winning woman's basketball team, Bolton signed on for the inaugural season of the Women's National Basketball Association this summer. And she's already a star on the European pro circuit. Enlisted in the Reserve through the year 2000, Bolton was granted a special waiver to play for the U.S. national team. Still, in all the press coverage she receives, writers often note Bolton's deadly shooting accuracy with a basketball (the team leader in three-point shooting), that she is one of 20 children, that she sings gospel, and that she is an Army Reserve lieutenant. When she wins, not only does the U.S. win, its armed forces win.

In one of the glaring ironies of the Olympic movement, many international stars, such as tennis player Andre Agassi, love to wallow in patriotic fervor for a fortnight.

"Their experience with patriotism is something we feel every day," Waldroup says. "When we make the Olympic team representing the United States, it's a double honor. That's about as patriotic as you could possibly be."

Evans agrees. A veteran of one war as a



Navy corpsman and of countless battles as a tae kwan do champion, she says: "After you've gone through all this fighting during the day, and you've outdone everybody, and you are standing on the podium as they play the national anthem because of what you've done that day, that's the ultimate." ■

## ALL TOGETHER NOW

You may never compete in the Olympics, but you are part of the effort to help outstanding military athletes fulfill their potential at the highest level of competition. The Armed Forces Sports Council is an office of the DoD that supports military athletes by soliciting corporate sponsorships. These funds allow the AFSC to organize competitions, plus cover the expenses of qualified athletes to train and compete, including equipment, uniforms, travel costs, and meals.

Most of these athletes are also full-time active duty. This support not only allows many military athletes to strive for the Olympics, Pan Am Games and other international competition, but also to represent the U.S. Armed Forces in the Council International du Sport Militaire (CISM) competitions against the military athletes of other nations. Along with supporting these athletes simply as a member of the military community, you can help further if you know of any firm that might become an AFSC sponsor. These companies should contact Charise Henderson at (703)325-6784.