



GREG HICKS

Wrestling (1965-1968)

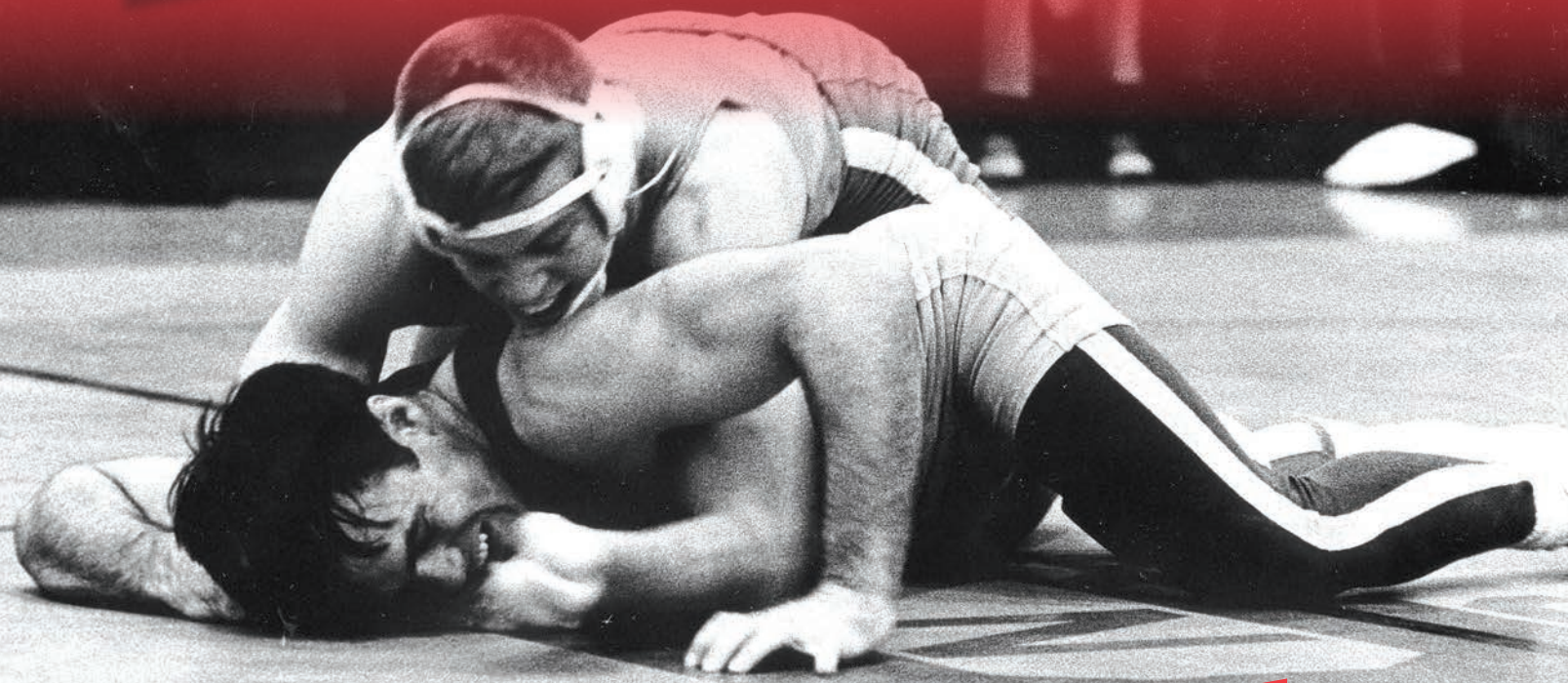


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LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Greg Hicks' Time At NC State Set The Stage
For His National And International Wrestling Success

BY RYAN TICE

Greg Hicks' name isn't plastered all over the NC State wrestling record books, but he was a trail-blazer for the program and one of its most successful international competitors ever.

Hicks' wrestling career was extremely fruitful, but also one driven by disappointment. And even after his competitive days ended, he has seen the life that followed shaped by the sport.

It began at Page High School in Greensboro. Hicks never won a state title — placing second as a junior and then falling back to third as a senior. However, he didn't let those results deter his dreams of wrestling in college.

He can still recall details of his first workout at NC State like it was weeks, not decades, ago. During a voluntary practice a new teammate a little bigger than him offered to roll around. They started grappling, and Hicks remembers being pinned “literally four or five times in two minutes.”

Welcome to college wrestling, Hicks thought to himself.

Later, another teammate informed Hicks that his partner that day was the reigning ACC Tournament Most Outstanding Wrestler, rising-junior Robert Brawley.

“That made me feel a little bit better,” Hicks recalled with a laugh.

Yet, being “embarrassed” on day one “was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me,” he explained. “It really made me realize I'm wrestling men now, not kids. So despite that first 2-3 minutes of my college experience, I decided I was all-in after that.”

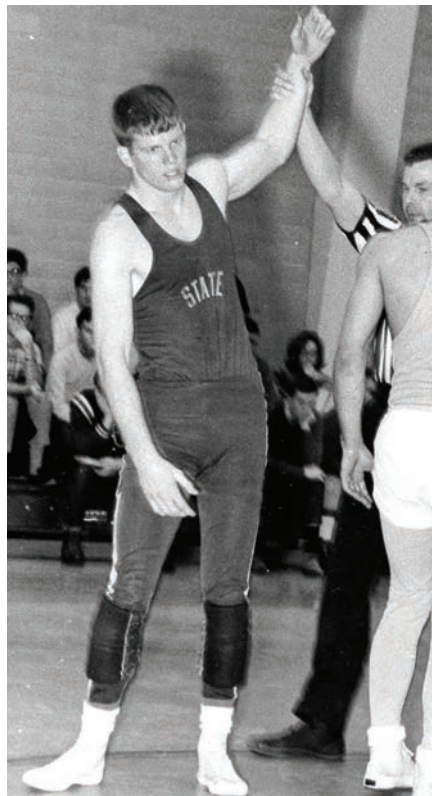
Hicks quickly rose to the top of the podium in the ACC. He won his first conference title as a sophomore in 1966 and was sent to the NCAA Championships.

He tasted immediate success on the big stage and was actually the first from NC State to ever wrestle in and win a match at NAAs. However, after his initial triumph, the 152-pounder lost his next bout to the eventual third-place finisher Jim Kamman.

In that version of the NCAA Championships (now a double-elimination tournament), the winning wrestler had to make the finals in order for the opponents he beat to be put into the consolation bracket. Kamman, an NCAA champ the following year, beat Hicks 10-2 in the round of 16 but lost in the semifinals to the eventual champion. With Kamman's loss, Hicks' first

In 1966, Hicks became the first wrestler at NC State to both wrestle and win a match at the NCAA Championships. He returned to the NAAs each of the next two seasons.

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Hicks was a two-time ACC champion at NC State, but he went on to bigger wrestling heights after college. He represented the U.S. at two world championships, placing fifth in 1975.

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chance to make national noise was over.

The following year, Hicks moved up to 160 pounds and won his second straight ACC title — becoming the second in school history to win two conference crowns, after Brawley, and the first to do so in consecutive seasons — but again lost to the eventual third-place finisher. This time, though, the defeat came in round one, to the weight's fifth seed.

In his senior year, Hicks lost in the ACC finals — “and I was supposed to win and be the outstanding wrestler and all of that,” he said — and then fell in his first match at NAAs.

“All three years, I never had the chance to go back through the consolations, and I definitely have thought of that over the years,” he admitted. “What could have happened? We'll never know.”

The first wrestler in NC State history to win a bout at the national tournament only won that one match at the event. A familiar feeling set in. Just like after high school, Hicks was confident he was better than his final showing at that level — he just needed the chance to prove it.

“It's funny how disappointments can factor into your motivation in life,” he said. “Losing that last ACC Tournament motivated me, and I kept thinking, ‘I could be

better than I am.’”

Through head coach Jerry Daniels, Hicks was presented the opportunity to compete across the country, and eventually internationally, with the sports ministry Athletes in Action, which was starting a full-time wrestling team.

Despite already accepting a job the summer before his senior year began, which would've used his chemical engineering degree, Hicks really wanted to continue on the mat. He talked his late wife, Sue — his childhood sweetheart whom he wed that summer — into the opportunity.

“I can always be an engineer, I can't always be an athlete,” he remembered telling her.

A 12-year adventure with the program ensued, with Hicks traveling around college campuses and then the world, wrestling and sharing his faith.

“Within three or four years, I was the national freestyle champ,” Hicks recalled. “It was after graduation that I started to really gain more national prominence. I guess I was a slow-maturing guy.

“NC State laid the groundwork. It made me a better and tougher guy and all the things you've got to have in wrestling.”

Hicks thrived in his post-college career. After he became one of the best wrestlers in the country at his weight class, he ascended to world acclaim. He was on a pair of U.S. National Teams and won a Pan-American Games gold medal, but still experienced the close calls and tough breaks — he calls them his “Murphy's laws” — that defined his high school and college careers.

In 1972 and 1976, he lost out on his bid to make the U.S. Olympic team to the eventual gold medalist. In 1974 and 1975 — non-Olympic years — he won the national tournament and represented the USA at the world championships, placing fifth in 1975. But a top-three finish and the accompanying hardware eluded him.

“I never medaled — that was one of my disappointments,” he said.

Greg Hicks

Wrestling (1965-1968)

Age: 71

Living: Raleigh

Occupation: Owner and President of Financial Resource Management

Did You Know? Hicks and his late wife Sue both graduated from and worked at NC State for 20-plus years, he as a volunteer assistant wrestling coach and she as an assistant for the football coaches. Both of their kids, Cari and Nathan, attended NC State, and his daughter met her husband there. His parents are also both NC State graduates, so Hicks joked his two granddaughters, Finley and Murphy, “have no choice but to attend NCSU one day!”



Hicks never competed in the Olympics, but he has been to four while working with Athletes in Action. Here, he attends one of the organization's Olympic projects with former Wolfpack linebacker Pat Teague (left).

PHOTO COURTESY GREG HICKS

But “to make it sting even more,” in 1972 the West German wrestling team was allowed to compete in the U.S. Championships. At the tournament, Hicks placed second to fellow American Wayne Wells, while the German finished third.

A few months later at the Olympics, Hicks is in the stands watching Wells win and the same German he beat finish third. But this time, he didn't have the opportunity to be the silver medalist between the two.

“In track and swimming, they take the top three U.S. place winners; in wrestling it's one,” he explained. “I'm sitting there watching the guy that beat me for the U.S. team spot win the gold medal — he's the best in the world in my weight class.

“The German that I beat 6-3 is on the podium, and I'm sitting in the stands. There's something wrong with this picture!

“I could have had a shot if they would have let the top two or top three guys from a country go in every weight class, but they just didn't do that.”

Yet, the disappointments never deterred Hicks.

“It doesn't haunt me, but it makes me wonder — what if the circumstances would have been just a little bit different? But I still did a lot of great things,” he noted.

“The Olympics are probably the one that really hits me the hardest because I never

made the U.S. team. But I'm pleased with everything else that happened, so I can't be that disappointed.”

Hicks reached a point in his grappling career that people just assumed he went to one of the national wrestling powerhouses, not NC State, which was more known for its basketball program then.

“People would know my name,” he remembered. “But numerous people would ask, ‘Greg, where did you go to school? Oklahoma State?’

“They couldn't comprehend that I went to NC State. For years, I had to correct people. They just couldn't imagine I went to a basketball school.”

Hicks has been even more successful in his life after wrestling, but stayed in the sport by returning to NC State as a volunteer assistant — a post he held for more than 20 years — which led to his wife being hired as an assistant for the football coaches.

She served in that role through several head coaches, including Hicks' former teammate and a fellow ACC champion wrestler in Chuck Amato, before retiring. She passed away in September after a battle with leukemia.

Just like Hicks' wrestling career couldn't be defined by his time at NC State, he can't be defined only by a decorated interna-

tional wrestling career.

He is still involved with Athletes in Action, founded and now serves as the president of Financial Resource Management in Raleigh, has authored three books, helped start a church and hosts two radio shows — and those are just the highlights.

After being read a list of his athletic feats and current activities, Hicks paused and said, “Whoa.”

It was almost like the boy that came to NC State simply to wrestle was astounded by the unexpected places the sport has taken him — from one side of the globe to the other.

“What God opened up is mind boggling to me,” he said. “I was an NC State student who said I'm going to be an engineer, get married and live happily ever after.

“Once I committed myself to Him and Athletes in Action showed up, I never would have in a million years guessed what my life would hold.

“It seems no way this could've happened. It was very fulfilling, all the way through the journey. There were some really tough times and some unbelievably fun and great times, too. There's no way I would go back and be a chemical engineer.

“It's an amazing journey when I think about it. ... Wrestling and State were clearly humongous stepping stones for me.” ■