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## ***An Oregon Hippie in Uncle Sam's Court: A Vietnam Era Fable***

As the 1972 U.S. Olympic wrestlers, arguably the best American team in history, arrived in Munich to do battle with the mighty Soviets, they had in their midst the largest wrestler in Olympic history, the youngest wrestler in Olympic history, the man who would become the most successful wrestler and coach in the nation's history, several devout Christians, a lawyer, and a man who would lose no matches in Munich yet win no medals. All are part of a larger story, but in this look at the way in which the cultural firestorm of the 60s torched the sports world, it is a free-living bantamweight from Oregon who takes center stage.

This paper argues that Rick Sanders provides a vivid case study of the tensions in the Vietnam era between established culture and the values of the amorphous movement of the young known as the "counterculture." It concludes that his legacy of unfulfilled promise is a fable-an improbable story-that could only have taken place in a nation of lost consensus. Sanders lived in defiance of the conventions of the sports establishment. He wore long hair, a beard and beads, and smoked marijuana at a time when those things were countercultural identity badges. He also wrestled with as much zest, creativity, and joy as any American wrestler in history. The conflict between Sanders' wrestling and lifestyles and the values of the sports establishment came to a head after the 1972 Olympics. Sanders, who was the first world champion the U.S. had ever had, won his second silver medal, and for his achievement was deemed by many a slacker, an underachiever seduced and mined by 60s hippie culture.

The ironic story of Sanders' vilification is a significant piece of history because in it are all the elements that formed the core of the "athletic revolution's" challenge to the conduct of sport in the late 60s and early 70s. The importance of winning, of manly behavior, of physical expression tamed, of sacrificial effort, and of submission to authority were being attacked in the late 60s by those outside sport. Those within sport perceived the challenges and the proposed alternatives to traditional ways as the very reason for American difficulties in Vietnam and, by extension, in American society generally.

As the U.S. military effort in Vietnam ground along ineffectively, single combat in the Olympics became a vital arena for measuring the nation's resolve and strength. Thus, the '72 wrestlers became lines on the era's canvas and that was a place Americans looked to anxiously for affirmation that the country still "looked" as it should. In contrast to Dan Gable, a gold medal wrestler of prodigious work habits, Sanders presented an unsettling portrait, a foreshadowing of what the nation might become if left to the devices of hippie society.

This paper draws on a wealth of primary sources that are part of research for my current book manuscript on sports in the Vietnam era. It also uses taped interviews with friends, coaches, and peers who knew Sanders well.



Business meetings are always tough.