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Feature/Preview

Where are they now? - Lee Kemp

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Gary Abbott/USA Wrestling



Lee Kemp, three-time World Champion, auto executive

When you think of wrestling greatness, as well as individual personal class, a prominent athlete that immediately comes to mind is Lee Kemp. One of the greatest freestyle wrestlers in history, the soft-spoken Kemp has always been a role model in how to act both on and off the mat.

His wrestling credentials are amazing. From Chardon, Ohio, Kemp was a high school and Junior National champion. In college, at the Univ. of Wisconsin, he won three NCAA Div. I titles and was a four-time finalist (losing only during his freshman year). On the international level, he won three World gold medals, but lost his chance for Olympic glory when the U.S. boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics. His matches were often close in score, but his mistake-free, patient style of wrestling proved to be a winner at every level.

After receiving an MBA during his wrestling years, Kemp entered the challenging world of big business. After working in the advertising industry and with a major national corporation, Kemp changed direction when he decided to pursue his own business – becoming an owner of car dealership. For the last 13 years, Kemp has owned Forest Lake Ford in Forest Lake, Minn., building the company from the bottom into a successful enterprise.

Kemp is among a select few minority owners of auto dealerships across the nation. His business career has mirrored his athletic career in many ways. Kemp has set high goals for himself, made a tremendous sacrifice and commitment, and found a way to win. USA Wrestling caught up with Kemp at his auto dealership in Minnesota this week.



When you ask Lee Kemp about the single most significant highlight of his wrestling career, he has two answers, both which are very detailed and thought out. This is very much like Kemp; there is a reason why things happen in his life, and he is fully aware of the significance of what is going on around him.

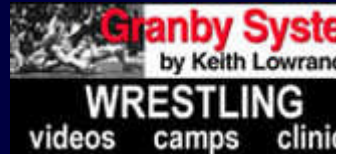
His "first" most important wrestling achievement happened during his junior year in high school, when Kemp made the jump from being an average wrestler into being the very best – a state champion in Ohio. Kemp sees that victory

as developing the personal attributes that led to many greater achievements later on, both on the mat and in the business world.

"I learned to be a champion in high school. My thought process was the same there as it was the rest of my career," said Kemp. "I became a three-time World Champion and three-time NCAA champion my junior year in high school."

Kemp was a .500 wrestler as a sophomore, but went to a summer camp where he met Dan Gable and became, as he says, "obsessed" with the sport. His junior year, he ran the table, going undefeated and beating the defending champion Jerry Metcalf in the

Camps of the Week



semifinals. Kemp trailed early in the match against Metcalf, but came on at the end with persistence and conditioning, as scored late points for the win.

"To be victorious in that match taught me to win from then on," said Kemp. "I won that match by not giving up, by continuing to come at him. He was not prepared for that. That breakthrough allowed me to win my entire career."



His other substantial memory was winning the 1978 World Championships, which was after his senior year in college. That made him the youngest U.S. wrestler to ever win a World title. He also takes pride in the fact that he became the first U.S. wrestler to win three World titles, also capturing gold medals in 1979 and 1982.

"I did something that had never been done before," said Kemp. "I pushed the bar a little bit. I raised the standard up higher."

Of course, with Lee Kemp, there is always another good story to go along with each achievement. Kemp tells how he almost didn't try out for that 1978 World Team, looking to take some time off after his senior year in college. His coach Duane Kleven, who knew Kemp's competitive nature, used that as a way to motivate Kemp to give it his best.

"Duane Kleven encouraged me to try out for that World Team. I didn't really do freestyle wrestling while I was in college," said Kemp. "My goal that year was to be the Outstanding Wrestler at the NCAA Championships. I didn't achieve that. Mark Churella won it."

"Kleven said maybe I should go to the World Team mini-camp. At first, I wasn't interested. Duane told me that Chuck Yagla was No. 1 on the ladder. (Yagla beat Kemp in the NCAA finals freshman year) He reminded me that Churella took the OW, and he would be there too. He knew the right words for me. I started training a little bit after that," he said.

Kemp's run to the No. 1 spot on the U.S. team that year was nothing short of miraculous. He won nine matches in four days, working his way past Joe Carr, Dave Schultz, Royce Oliver, Mark Churella and finally two wins over Chuck Yagla. In fact, head coach Dan Gable made Kemp wrestle Schultz twice, after the first win was only on a criteria decision. For somebody who had done very little freestyle, it was an amazing run, and a sign of things to come.

A few other highlights included winning the Junior Nationals (with wins over Mark Churella and Paul Martin) and a victory in 1974 in the Cleveland Arena during a dual meet against the powerful Russian Junior National team.

During the years that Kemp was winning World titles for the United States, he was also going to graduate school to achieve an MBA. He had many people encourage him to pursue high goals in the business world.

"I knew wrestling would end," said Kemp. "I was smart enough to know that. I went out and got my MBA. After the 1980 boycott, that's when I knew I needed another direction."

Kemp said that people like Terry Shockley, a businessman in Madison in the television industry, and ad executive Chuck Wimbley, were among his mentors. Kemp's undergraduate grades were not exceptional, but his work ethic and commitment helped him become an A- student in grad school.

Looking back, Kemp believes his commitment to school may have cost him his chance at the 1984 U.S. Olympic team. He lost to Dave Schultz in the Olympic Trials, and Schultz went on to win the Olympic gold medal. Kemp chose to skip the 1983 World Championships because it would interfere with his final semester in graduate school. Schultz won the spot and went on to capture the World title, and his wrestling took off from there.

"The Worlds were in October and I'd miss school. It was the same situation Cael (Sanderson) faced in 2001. If I went, I would have missed that semester so I decided not to go," said Kemp. "That gave Dave the confidence he needed after winning the World Championships."

"In hindsight, I had an edge over him in 1983. I could have finished school later. I tried to decide on my future. Once you make plans to get out, you are done. I was trying to plan it so perfectly, in the process, it didn't work out that way. But that probably gave me the

opportunity to be a car dealer later," he said.

Kemp had an opportunity to pursue a career in big business, working for the Burrell Communications Group in Chicago, Ill, then the Clairol Corporation in New York. For a quiet, hard-working athlete who learned to let his actions speak for him, the corporate community was like a whole different world to him. Kemp had to make many changes in himself to succeed.

"I went through a transition which was very difficult," said Kemp. "Communication was not a skill I needed as an athlete. I showed them by winning. I did not develop a dominant personality. In business, they saw my achievements, and met me, and they did not see the connection. I just never had to do that. At school, they didn't teach you to do that. You could be anonymous. I'd go to grad school in my sweat clothes. My summer internship was the World Team Trials, and camps and clinics. My MBA was like another trophy. When I got into the workforce, it was like I was hit by a baseball bat."

It was at the Burrell Communications Group where Kemp met a role model that would change the direction of his career. The owner was Tom Burrell, a black executive who was CEO at the company, which at the time was the world's largest minority-owned advertising agency.

"That was the time I got the idea to own a company," said Kemp. "I'd never seen a black person own a business. That impressed me a lot. That made an impact on me."

Kemp was an account executive, and had some opportunities to work with Burrell on business projects. Kemp was in a support role, but he tried to learn as much as he could from the boss.

"It was like seeing Dan Gable when I was in camp in 10th grade," said Kemp. "I was trying to duplicate what he did. I went back into that thought process. When he recognized me, it was like Gable recognizing me in camp. You take that phrase he said and hang with it forever. Burrell said, 'I was like you when I started. I learned the skills I needed to be successful.' I wanted to own my own business like he did. If I had not been there, later I wouldn't have taken the risk to step outside the comfort level of a corporate job."

It was at Clairol that Kemp felt as if he might not be able to reach his goals within the corporate world. Because of the politics there, it was not like athletics where you could make your own mark, strictly by performance.

When Kemp was attending the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, he visited with a Wisconsin alumni named Rusty Restuccia. Later, Restuccia sent him a note, asking if he would consider getting into a Ford dealer training program. The concept met Kemp's idea of what he wanted to do with his professional life.

"I borrowed and begged to get into the dealership program," said Kemp. "It was an incredible amount of money. I said I had it, even though I didn't. The only question with me was the money and I said I could get it. In the program, they look for character, capacity and capital. The three C's. I had the first two, based upon my training and business background."

Kemp's break came with an opening at a Ford Dealership in Forest Lake, a small community outside of Minneapolis. The company had 14 employees in 1991. Kemp sold off his car, and was picked up at the airport by one of the workers there.

"We carried my bags, walked in and I was a dealer," said Kemp. "I sat behind the desk and didn't know what to do. How do you train to be an owner? I was like trying to wrestle by watching rather than doing. I struggled and used every ounce of tenacity. I slowly built the business, and put together a team of people."

"It's a crapshoot. You ante up the money, and if it doesn't work, it's over. You jump in with no guarantee. If it loses money, you are done. The trial window was small. I was tested to the max," said Kemp.

Using the skills he learned in wrestling and in business, Kemp went to work.

"The buck stops at your office. You are the first there and the last to leave. You become consumed," he said. "You are busy keeping people employed. And if there is no people, you do it yourself. It is an incredible challenge, equal to that I had as a wrestler."

Kemp has turned a struggling business into one that is now making profits. He has been there for 13 years, and has seen his staff grow from 14 to 44 people. Only two people remain from his workforce in 1991. The challenges continue to come and are always

changing. Kemp has learned new skills in this position.

"It has been a learning process," said Kemp. "You keep going back to the drawing board. The only way I could do that was to use what I learned as an athlete."

Kemp is a father of four, and he and wife Linda have made their life in Minnesota. In his early years there, he spent time supporting the local high school program and training with club athletes at the Univ. of Minnesota. Wrestling is still important to him, but does not easily fit into his schedule.

He was one of the 30 U.S. World and Olympic champions honored at the 2003 World Championships in New York City in September.

"It was great," said Kemp. "I always wanted to meet Fred Fozzard, and he was there. I don't watch wrestling much. To see it at that level again was great. I really enjoyed it all."

Now, Kemp seeks excellence in the business world, just like he did when he was on the mats winning gold medals for the United States.

"No matter what, even with a bad economy, there will be guys who make money," said Kemp. "For me, the doors will always be open. I'll be one of those guys. It's like Gable, who always found a way to do it. He won as a coach, year after year after year. I want to be the guy that will always be there."

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