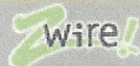


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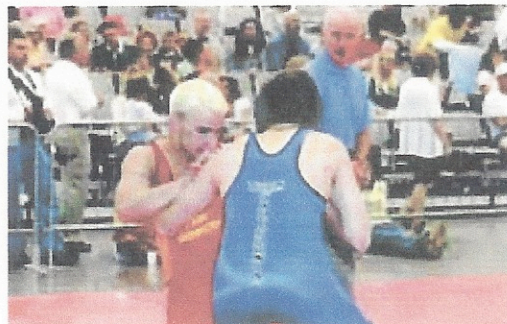
## Local Sports

### Olympic hopeful strives to get there

By: Elizabeth Fong

March 25, 2004

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Former Mount Si wrestler and weightlifter Vince Gregory is Baker's trainer and has high hopes for his student.

**NORTH BEND - Olympic wrestling hopeful Christopher Baker claims he's built for the sport and ready to contend with the world's best.**

"I'm like a stick of dynamite," said 25-year-old Baker of North Bend. "I'm not very big, but there's a big explosion there."

Baker, a 5-foot-3-inch athlete who weighs 120 pounds, has dreamed of competing in the Olympics since he was 5 years old. He has edged toward the Olympic Games his entire life, training to beat the best and be the best. And now is his chance.

Baker is a top-10 contender for the U.S. Olympic wrestling team, which will compete this summer at the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. He has been ranked on numerous occasions, including several times in national competitions. He placed 10th in the U.S. Nationals in 2001. Last year, he placed second in his 120-pound weight division at the Amateur Athletic Union USA Wrestling National Championships.

His next goal is to conquer the 2004 Wrestling Nationals in Las Vegas, which will take place April 7 - 10. He is determined to place in the top eight, which will qualify him to compete in the U.S. Olympic Trials in Indianapolis.

The Snoqualmie Valley athlete originally hails from Corning, Calif., where he competed in judo, track, baseball, football and tennis as a teen. Although he enjoyed many sports, his passion clung to wrestling throughout high school, college and now.

"When I found the wrestling mat, everything else kind of just disappeared and I became a wrestler," said Baker, who competed at the college level for Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma. In college, teammates nicknamed him "Mighty Mouse" because he was small, yet fierce.

Training for competition requires a strict focus and a fierce confidence, said Baker, who lives, breathes and sleeps wrestling. If he's not working, he's wrestling and training. He sleeps only two to three hours a night to make time for his full-time job and his full-time dream, he said.

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Even when he's setting up the floor at the Issaquah Costco where he works, his thoughts are on training. Stocking and lifting heavy items have helped him build a lot of upper body strength, he said.

"If you saw me, you'd probably say, 'Wow, that guy is pretty big.' I'm five three, but just stacked as far as upper body," Baker said.

He trains several hours a day with wrestling world champions and former Olympic alternates. His trainer, Vince Gregory, was an Olympic weightlifting hopeful years ago.

Gregory said Baker's fierce determination is what fuels his Olympic potential.

"You can have all the talent in the world, but if you don't have the passion and will to achieve at the optimum performance level, you won't make it," he said.

He compared Baker's required focus on the wrestling mat to the focus a person experiences when he or she is about to hit a car:

"Seconds before someone's about to crash, they're mentally and fiercely intense. They're swerving left and right, completely focused," Gregory said.

"Baker must maintain that kind of sharpness throughout a whole match because one mistake on the mat could "mean everything," he added.

Although Baker is trying to concentrate strictly on training, his lack of traveling funds clouds that focus. Money is the only obstacle that stands between him and his dream, he said.

"I could be the best wrestler in the world, but if I don't have the resources to fly to the nationals, I'll never be able to achieve my dream," Baker said.

Costco doesn't sponsor athletes, so he has to raise money for himself, he added.


Those are stresses and strains every athlete has to face, according to Gregory, who hopes Baker can push beyond his financial worries and really concentrate on training. He stressed the importance of focus when training for any competition.

But Baker said he already believes he's got the resolve and heart.

"I'm focused and ready, and I have a good feeling this is going to be my year," he said. "I've been training my whole life for this moment in time."

Elizabeth Fong is a student in the University of Washington School of Communications News Laboratory.

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