

Injuries take Hildebrand on long, difficult journey

By Steve Turcotte
Of the Emerald

Any athletes you talk to will almost certainly have a tale or two about their athletic endeavors. But if you were to talk with Oregon wrestler Jim Hildebrand, his tales would read like a medical journal and trip travel log rolled into one.

Hildebrand, who wrestles at 150 pounds and is a fifth-year senior on the Duck squad, has had more than his share of injuries. Hildebrand has undergone four major operations in eight years — two on his right shoulder, one on his left shoulder and also a knee operation.

His injuries have led to his dropping out of school three times and venturing back to his home in Watsonville, Calif.

"It's amazing I'm still in one piece," laughed Hildebrand when recalling the numerous injuries he's endured. "But right now I feel good."

Hildebrand came to Oregon in the fall of 1978 with glowing high school credentials. He placed fourth in the California state high school wrestling meet his junior year and racked up a 43-0 record his senior season before dropping his initial match at the state tournament.

"That loss at state my senior year still haunts me," admits Hildebrand. "I was expected to win it all and I didn't. I think losing that match has made me keep wrestling."

Hildebrand had begun to find the right ingredients to becoming a successful Pac-10 wrestler his freshman year. He finished fourth in the conference tournament and the signs were all pointed in the right direction.

Hildebrand appeared to be a shoe-in for a starting spot on the Duck roster his sophomore season, but injuries knocked him out.

During a practice session, Hildebrand suffered a dislocated shoulder which required surgery.

"It was my right shoulder that got hurt," he explained. "It was a shoulder which I had already had operated on. When I first had it operated on in high school, the doctor told me that if I ever hurt it again, I would have to give up wrestling."

"But the doctors up here did a good job and said I would be able to continue wrestling."

That was when the travel log portion of

his life began. In April, following the surgery, Hildebrand's father died and he went home to help the family out with its trucking business. But soon after leaving school, Hildebrand began to wrestle again.

"I came back in 1980 after redshirting my sophomore year and my left shoulder started bothering me," Hildebrand said. "I was starting to feel really bummed out — I just packed up and left halfway through the first term."

So back to the family business he went and apparently his interest in wrestling had fizzled. But after wrestling in a tournament in the spring of 1981, Hildebrand's interest in the sport was rekindled after he won all his 10 matches and won the tournament.

He headed back to Oregon in the fall ready to wrestle for coach Ron Finley. But again ran into problems.

"My head wasn't into it," Hildebrand admitted. "I just wasn't feeling really strong

and I wasn't in good shape. I went home in the winter and came back in the spring and started wrestling with some of the guys on the team."

Last fall, after working all summer in the family business, Hildebrand contemplated returning to wrestle for a fifth and final season. But when Finley called and said that he really wanted him, Hildebrand packed his bags and headed back to the Emerald City.

"We called him up this last December and said, 'come on back up, we need you,'" said Finley. "He dropped everything and came back up to wrestle."

Hildebrand has not been a disappointment in his return to Oregon. He has posted a 10-1 record this season, with the lone loss coming in a tournament at Portland State.

Hildebrand will be the first to admit that although he has come and gone a few times, wrestling has always been his first love.

"Wrestling has always been in the back of my mind whenever I have gotten injured or have gone home. I have wrestled since the seventh grade and wrestling is something that is really hard to let go of for me."

But coming back into the wrestling groove after a long time off has not been the easiest of times for Hildebrand.

"Everytime I come back from an injury it's like starting over," admitted Hildebrand. "You have your shoulder in a sling for three months and you lose everything. It takes a lot to come back from injuries."

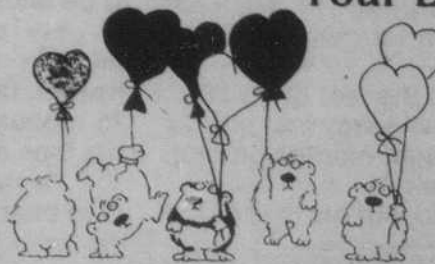
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