

BY GREG JOHNSON

STORYBOOK END

OUR TOP 10 MOST DRAMATIC FINISHES

With all apologies to a certain cable network, nobody does drama like intercollegiate sports.


Whether it is a last-second play, an individual or team overcoming obstacles, or still believing in victory when all seems lost, NCAA championship contests are packed with dramatic moments.

More than 2,000 NCAA championships have been conducted in the last 25 years. This is our attempt to rank the 10 that were the most dramatic, regardless of division, gender or sport.

First, some parameters.

Since the Association celebrated its Centennial in 2006, the last quarter century seems like an appropriate starting point. Our list encompasses championships since 1982-83, which also marks the time at which the NCAA began conducting women's championships.

We all have personal favorites – as a participant, alumnus or fan. Everyone's top 10 will differ, but here's ours:

 Watch video of selected dramatic finishes at NCAACHampionMagazine.org.

FINISHES



10 'Raise the bar'

2003 National Collegiate Women's Ice Hockey Championship

Minnesota Duluth 4, Harvard 3 (double overtime)



Hanne Sikio (top) of Minnesota Duluth looks to pass. Nora Tallus (above) is all smiles in the postgame news conference.

If an emerging sport has an early signature championship game, people take notice.

The 2003 final qualifies. On a cold March day on the shore of Lake Superior, these two programs participating in a recently created championship showed why sudden-death overtime is so special. Twelve Olympians representing the United States, Canada, Sweden, Finland and Switzerland took the ice for the third women's championship game. When it was over, Minnesota Duluth left the sellout home crowd – a record 5,167 – howling in delight after pulling out a 4-3 double-overtime victory to notch the Bulldogs' third consecutive title.

Nora Tallus, who had been whistled for four penalties in the game, ended the thriller with a slap shot from the top of the left face-off circle to set off a wild celebration.

In the second period, Tallus, a native of Finland, picked up the third of her four penalties and Harvard took a 3-2 lead as she was coming out of the box. Minnesota Duluth coach Shannon Miller, a former coach of the Canadian National Team, challenged Tallus, telling her, "You owe us a goal."

The 5-foot-3-inch forward delivered 4:19 into the second overtime. After escaping from the bottom of the pile from her teammates, Tallus skated over to Miller to say, "I paid you back."

Before the game, expectations were high. Both Miller and Harvard coach Katey Stone knew a well-played game could go a long way toward putting the emerging sport on the map.

"I gave Katey a little hug, and said, 'Let's go out there, have some fun and raise the bar,'" Miller said.

'It just went dead silent.'



Midfielder Cara Gabage celebrates the moment after scoring the winning goal against Tufts.

SUZANNE OUELLETTE / NCAA PHOTOS

2000 Division III Women's Soccer Championship

The College of New Jersey 2, Tufts 1

Playing on the road in a championship match is hardly ideal.

That's what TCNJ faced against Tufts in December 2000. Fortunately for the Lions, they had a clutch performer in sophomore Cara Gabage. Her header off a rebound with three seconds remaining in regulation stunned the partisan Medford, Massachusetts, crowd and gave TCNJ its third NCAA title.

TCNJ held a 1-0 lead for most of the match until Tufts' Victoria Nusse tied the score in the 77th minute. The home fans fueled Tufts the rest of the way, but the Lions fought off attack after attack.

In the waning seconds, TCNJ's Denise Buckley, who scored the game's first goal nine minutes into the match, made a strong run down the left flank and sent a centering pass toward junior Lisa Pelligrino. Tufts goalkeeper Ran-

dee McArdle batted the ball before it reached the attacking Pelligrino, but she couldn't control the rebound.

Pelligrino took a shot, and again McArdle made the save. This time, the rebound popped straight into the air, where Gabage (whose married name today is Kahn) raced over to head the loose ball into the net with only three ticks remaining.

"All I remember is we made a mad dash toward the goal," said Kahn, now a detective for the Cumberland County Prosecutors Office in New Jersey. "Their fans were wrapped around all three sides of the stands and going crazy after they scored. I was the kind of player when that happened, it got me going more."

"It was like the life went out of the whole stadium," TCNJ coach Joe Russo said of the game-winning goal. "It was an eerie feeling, because the fans were ranting and raving for the previous 20 minutes or so. Then, it just went dead silent."

"That's when I remember thinking, 'Wow!'"

It's difficult, down 24-7 at halftime to an opponent well on the way to rushing for more than 400 yards, to convince a team it still has a chance to win. It's even tougher trailing by 15 points with less than three minutes remaining.

Somehow, Northwest Missouri State coach Mel Tjeerdsma and his staff did just that.

The Bearcats scored 30 points in the fourth quarter – the last eight coming with 10 seconds remaining in regulation – to force overtime. Eventually, they pulled out a 58-52 victory in four overtimes in Florence, Alabama, to claim their second straight title and complete a comeback over Carson-Newman that ranks for the ages.

In this roller coaster game, Northwest Missouri State's Tony Miles scored on a seven-yard pass and returned a kickoff 81 yards for another score, but the Bearcats were still behind, 44-29, after Carson-Newman's Antwon Oliver scored on a 12-yard run with 3:34 remaining.

"I've been told that there were people out in the parking lot selling Carson-Newman national championship T-shirts at that point," Tjeerdsma said.

A Bearcats score less than a minute later cut the margin to eight, but all appeared lost when Carson-Newman recovered an onside kick and resumed its punishing rushing game.

However, with the game on the line, Northwest Missouri State finally halted the Eagles on fourth-and-short with 51 seconds to play. Then, quarterback Travis Miles, after missing a

1999 Division II Football Championship

Northwest Missouri State 58, Carson-Newman 52 (four overtimes)



play when defenders knocked the wind out of him, returned to take his team downfield in 41 seconds, capped by a 34-yard pass to J.R. Hill. He then found Ryan George on a fade pattern in the back of the end zone for the tying two-point conversion.

"That's when I remember thinking, 'Wow!'" said Tjeerdsma.

The first and second overtimes were scoreless, then each team scored a touchdown and two-point conversion in the next period. Hill caught a scoring pass from Miles in the fourth overtime, but the Bearcats failed to convert on the two-point attempt.

However, Northwest Missouri State safety Ryan Miler recovered a fumble during Carson-Newman's possession that ended the game and sparked a wild celebration.

Eighteen years later, the ESPN analyst who worked the game, Bill Curry, was present at the American Football Coaches Association convention. "I still say the 1999 national championship game was the best game I've ever seen," Curry told Tjeerdsma and others attending the event.

Northwest Missouri State head coach Mel Tjeerdsma holds up his new trophy.

PAUL ADAMS / NCAA PHOTOS

'I wished Samantha's home run over the fence.'

2005 Division I Softball Championship
Michigan 4, UCLA 1 (10 innings)



Players come off of the Michigan bench to mob Samantha Findlay after her game-winning home run against UCLA.

7 When Michigan reached the Women's College World Series best-of-three championship final against perennial powerhouse UCLA, setting a historical precedent took a backseat to the simple quest of beating the team in the other dugout.

The Wolverines, who started the 2005 campaign by winning 32 of 33 straight road games and then held the No. 1 ranking for most of the season, were also trying to become the first program east of the Mississippi to win a Division I softball title.

"At the time, we didn't care where we were from or what time zone we were in," said Wolverines coach Carol Hutchins. "Those kids were about Michigan. History will decide the things we can't control, like the legacy or what it does for college softball."

Michigan staved off elimination in the two pool games it played within 48 hours of taking the field against the Bruins. The team from Ann Arbor then lost, 5-0, in the first game of the final and trailed, 2-0, in Game 2.

"We were out of gas," Hutchins said. But Michigan rallied for a

5-2 victory to force a third and deciding game.

Thanks to a bases-loaded single in the top of the sixth by Michigan freshman Samantha Findlay, the title game went into extra innings, where the Bruins threatened to end it in the ninth by loading the bases with two outs.

But Jennie Ritter pitched out of the jam, then Michigan put two runners on base via an error and infield single in the top of the 10th, again bringing up Findlay. On a 1-1 count, she hit a fly ball to left field.

"I wished Samantha's home run over the fence," Hutchins said. "What made it more dramatic is that we were 60 feet away from being the runner-up a few minutes earlier."

Findlay became the first freshman to be named the WCWS' most outstanding player, but true to form, she enjoyed sharing the moment with her teammates more after the Wolverines closed out the series in the bottom of the 10th.

"I couldn't ask for a better team," Findlay said. "I would give up any individual awards over this team. Playing for this team has meant the world to me."

'It's probably the most clutch shot in the history of golf.'

Marisa Baena has earned almost \$2 million on the LPGA Tour, including grabbing the only win of her professional career when she won the women's world match play event in 2005.

But for pure excitement, no shot she has ever struck ranks with the hole-out she had in a playoff at the Dunes Course in La Quinta, California, that helped Arizona claim its first NCAA women's golf championship.

"The scoreboard said we were up three shots," said Baena, who already had clinched medalist honors as she lined up an eight-foot putt on the 18th green. But coach Rick LaRose told her the team needed the putt to win the title.

"I remember telling him, 'What are you talking about? We are three strokes ahead,'" Baena said. "He told me we were actually tied. But I didn't really believe him."

She missed, then realized the Wildcats had been forced into a playoff with San Jose State.

"I still don't know how it didn't go in," Baena said. "I was disappointed that I didn't make the putt. I was very upset that I had the chance and let it go."

Five players from each team replayed the 18th hole in two groups. The teams could discard the highest score on the hole, then total the remaining scores to see which team completed the hole in the fewest shots. Baena played in the second group with two of her teammates and two San Jose State student-athletes.

Two Arizona players in the first group went bogey, double-bogey, then Baena's tee shot left her 147 yards from the hole.

After backing off due to a moving cameraman, she hit an 8-iron

true. The ball took one bounce, then disappeared for an eagle 2.

"It was all over the pin," Baena said. "The next thing I know everybody was screaming. I heard people yelling, 'Oh my God,' and jumping up and down."

LaRose added: "It's probably the most clutch shot in the history of golf. She had to do it, and she did it. From that distance, it was incredible."

Arizona's Marisa Baena didn't need her putter after her historic 147-yard hole-out.



1996 Division I Women's Golf Championships
Marisa Baena's hole-out in a playoff gives Arizona the national team title

HANS GUTKNECHT / NCAA PHOTOS

Every March you see the replay: Derek Whittenburg's desperation 30-foot shot coming up short, only to turn into the perfect alley-oop pass for Lorenzo Charles, whose dunk in the waning seconds gave North Carolina State one of the biggest upsets in college sports.

The fact that the winning basket came on a dunk against a Houston team nicknamed Phi Slama Jama only adds to the story.

"It is a script that no one would've believed," said Charles, who now owns a ground transportation company in Raleigh, North Carolina. "We had to claw and scratch our way just to get into the tournament.

We were able to win some games in a fashion that no one expected."

During an improbable postseason run, "The Cardiac Pack" won three tightly contested games in the Atlantic Coast Conference tournament, then rallied from six points down with 24 seconds remaining in its first-round NCAA tournament game against Pepperdine to survive in double overtime. They then edged UNLV, 71-70, in the second round and beat top-seeded Virginia, 63-62, in the West regional final.

North Carolina State took the floor in the final believing it could find a way to beat an athletically superior team that featured future top 50 all-time NBA players Clyde Drexler and Akeem (he added an "H" to his first name later) Olajuwon.

"We were saying to ourselves that Houston wasn't better than North Carolina or Virginia," said Whittenburg, now the head coach at Fordham.

After weathering a 17-2 run by Houston in the second half, North Carolina State had the ball in a tied game with 44 seconds left.

Today, Charles remembers being challenged by charismatic coach Jim Valvano as the team broke from its huddle after a timeout.

"All he said to me was, 'I wish you would wake up. You haven't done anything tonight,'" Charles said. "I remember just shaking my head. A few seconds later, we came out national champions."

After a near steal by Houston's Benny Anders, Whittenburg heaved the ball toward the basket.

"I had the best view that the ball was going to be short," Charles said. "When I came down, I watched the last two seconds tick off the clock."

Valvano and the rest of the Wolfpack raced onto the court, looking for somebody to hug.

'It is a script that no one would've believed.'

1983 Division I Men's Basketball Championship

North Carolina State 54, Houston 52





North Carolina State's Lorenzo Charles jams the ball in the hoop while Houston's Akeem Olajuwon can do nothing but watch.

RICH CLARKSON / NCAA PHOTOS

'That's the kind of shot that changes your life.'

4



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

1994 Division I Women's Basketball Championship North Carolina 60, Louisiana Tech 59

Whether it is in the backyard, the driveway or shooting alone in a gym, most of us have pretended to hit a game-winning shot at the buzzer to win a championship.

Charlotte Smith made her dream real with a three-pointer as time expired that gave North Carolina a 60-59 victory over Louisiana Tech in the 1994 championship game in Richmond, Virginia.

Coach Sylvia Hatchell surprised even herself by instructing her team to try for the win, despite the fact that Smith had made only eight three-point shots all season.

"I was standing outside the huddle talking to my assistants going over what we should do," Hatchell said. "For some reason, I just walked away from them. I can't tell you why I did that. I went into the huddle and told the team we were going for the win."

North Carolina used Kodak All-American Tonya Sampson as a decoy in designing the three-point play, then Stephanie Lawrence made a great pass from underneath the backboard and over a defender to the open Smith.

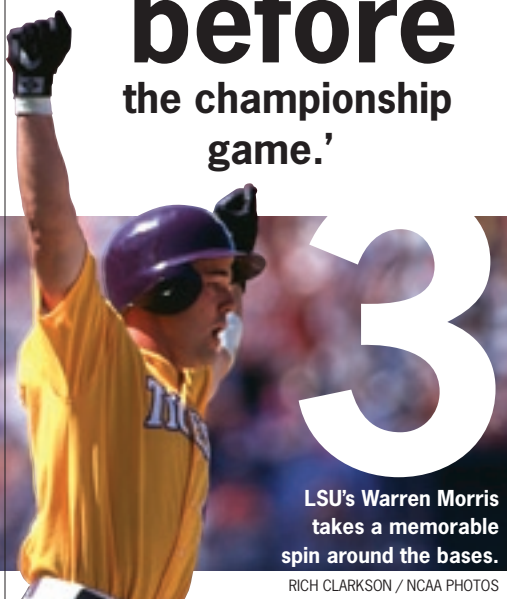
"At that point, it was just catch and release," Smith said. "When it went in, I was overwhelmed, elated. I was every adjective you could think of."

Hatchell added, "That's the kind of shot that changes your life. It made us No. 1, and we all got beautiful championship rings."

North Carolina's Charlotte Smith hits the winner at the end of the 1994 championship.

'The first day I felt like I could take my full swing was the batting practice

the day before the championship game.'



LSU's Warren Morris takes a memorable spin around the bases.

RICH CLARKSON / NCAA PHOTOS

1996 Division I Baseball Championship

LSU 9, Miami (Florida) 8

Warren Morris is the only man to end the Men's College World Series with a game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth inning.

That alone is dramatic enough, but when you consider the story leading up to the walk-off blast, it is remarkable.

Morris, who today is a financial planner in Alexandria, Louisiana, struggled through the early part of that season, unable to generate any of the power he had displayed in the past because of a hand injury. He finally removed himself from the lineup as the pain became unbearable.

"It got bad enough that I would go to class and couldn't write," said Morris, who was a Southeastern Conference Academic Honor Roll selection with a 3.5 GPA in zoology in 1996.

When a hand specialist figured out that he had broken the bone in his palm, he underwent surgery. He then slowly made his way back into the lineup, but still didn't have his normal power.

But the Tigers marched through the NCAA tournament and eventually reached the final of the MCWS, extending the season long enough for the left-handed hitting Morris to see signs of progress.

"As corny as it sounds, the first day I felt like I could take my full swing was the batting practice the day before the championship game," said Morris, who played more than three years in the major leagues with the Pittsburgh Pirates, Minnesota Twins and Detroit Tigers.

In the final, a mistake-plagued LSU team found itself down 7-3 after six innings. The Tigers came back with two runs apiece in the bottom of the seventh and eighth innings, then again fell behind by a run in the top of the ninth.

Miami then called on freshman reliever Robbie Morrison to close out the game.

Morris came to the plate with the tying run at third base and two outs. Morrison delivered a slider on the first pitch, and Morris launched a line drive toward the right field wall.

"As soon as he hit it, I remember thinking, 'This game is tied,'" Bertman said. Then the ball kept traveling, clearing the wall.

"The first inclination I had it was a home run was when I noticed our first base coach, Daniel Tomlin, jump about 10 feet in the air," Morris said. "Then I started jumping, and I noticed the pain hit the Miami players, because they were on the ground. That's when it clicked in that we won this thing."

'An incredible peace flushed over my body when I saw Anthony had the ball.'

Barton was facing Winona State, winner of a record 56 straight games, in the final in Springfield, Massachusetts. Fortunately for the Bulldogs, they had Anthony "Little Ant" Atkinson on their side.

Atkinson put together an incredible string of clutch plays in the Elite Eight, including a personal 10-1 run in the last 45 seconds of the final and the game-winning layup at the buzzer after a 2.1-second sprint from midcourt to the rim.

In the quarterfinals, Barton downed Grand Valley State, 83-81, in overtime on Atkinson's three-pointer at the buzzer. In an 80-79 semifinal win against Cal State San Bernardino, Atkinson drove the length of the court as time wound down, then made the game-winning free throw with 1.5 seconds remaining after being fouled.

Trailing against Winona State, 74-67, with 45 seconds left, the unstoppable 5-foot-10-inch Atkinson once again took charge.

"I told him he had to take over if we stood a chance," Barton coach Ron Lievens said.

He made several driving baskets, including a reverse layup in

traffic to tie the game at 75 with 11 seconds remaining.

"That was the toughest shot he ever made in his life," Lievens said.

Then, Bobby Buffaloe stole the ball from Winona State's Zach Malvik and quickly passed it to Atkinson, who beat the clock one more time with a game-winner.

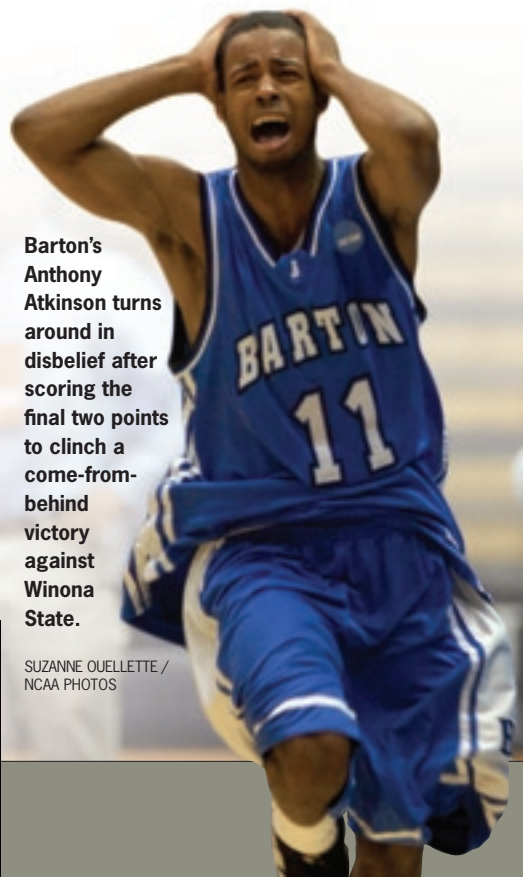
"An incredible peace flushed over my body when I saw Anthony had the ball," Lievens said. "I knew he would make a good decision."

Replays showed Atkinson released the ball with two-tenths of a second left on the clock. They also showed the wild celebration that followed, as Atkinson's teammates chased him around the court.

"Because of that game, people know about Barton College and Wilson, North Carolina," Lievens said. "We beat a classy team in Winona State. It was incredible to see David beat Goliath."

2007 Division II Men's Basketball Championship

Barton 77, Winona State 75



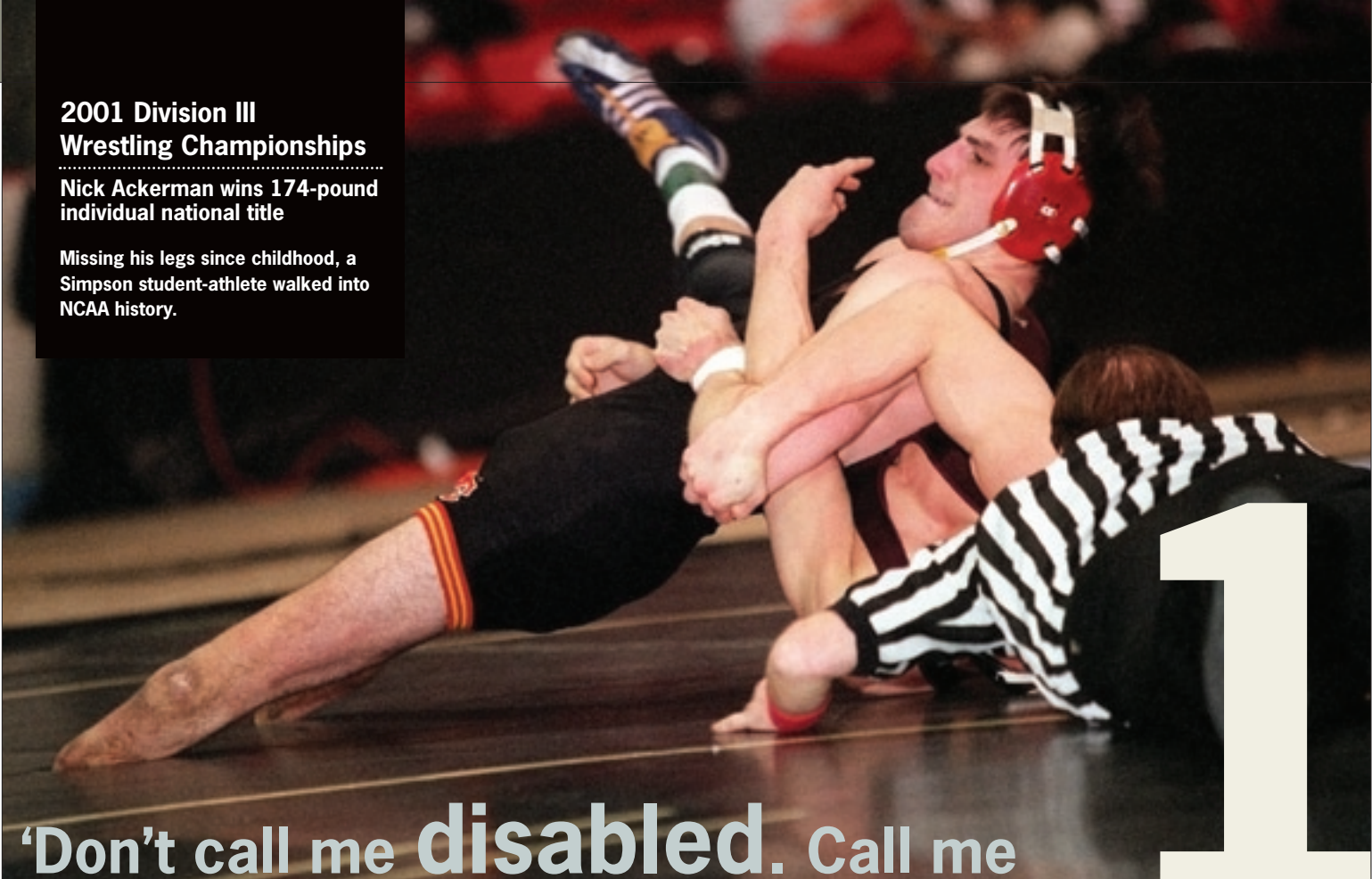
Barton's Anthony Atkinson turns around in disbelief after scoring the final two points to clinch a come-from-behind victory against Winona State.

SUZANNE OUELLETTE / NCAA PHOTOS

2001 Division III Wrestling Championships

Nick Ackerman wins 174-pound individual national title

Missing his legs since childhood, a Simpson student-athlete walked into NCAA history.



'Don't call me disabled. Call me national champion.'

When fans of your conference rival are standing to applaud, you know you've accomplished something great.

Simpson wrestler Nick Ackerman's 13-11 victory in the final of the 174-pound weight division over defending Division III national champion Nick Slack of Augsburg, winner of 60 straight matches, was an upset in itself.

But what makes this the most memorable championship performance of the past 25 years is that Ackerman won the title despite having his lower legs amputated when he was 18 months old to stop an aggressive form of bacterial meningitis.

Ackerman didn't know much about his opponent in the 2001 final, despite Slack's credentials.

"I don't like to know all the things about someone before I wrestle them," Ackerman said. "I block it out. Later, I was like, 'Holy crap. He's not so bad.' He is a monster of a guy. It started at his ankles and went all the way up. He was a large V."

But Ackerman, who today makes prosthetics for others, soon gained the upper hand, even winning the accolades of fans from rival schools in the process.

"I beat a guy from Loras College, 2-1, in the quarter-

finals. I had lost to him twice that year," said Ackerman, who was 96-41 in his college career. "He beat me once in the conference finals and in the conference duals. After I beat him, I had the whole Loras crowd hating me. (But) I saw a picture where those guys were standing and cheering after the final. They were the same guys that were yelling at me earlier. It was pretty cool to see."

Bryan Poulter, who coached Ackerman at Colfax-Mingo High School in Iowa, said he still hears from people he's never known because of his relationship with Ackerman. They ask for advice on how to coach athletes with disabilities.

"Even when Nick was young and someone said something about his disability, he would always correct them and say, 'I don't have a disability. I have ability.' He never saw anything he couldn't do."

He stuck to his story even when a reporter used the word "disabled" in asking him about his championship win.

"The guy said, 'What do you want people to call you?' I said, 'I don't care, don't call me disabled. You can call me national champion.'"



DAVE PETERSON / NCAA PHOTOS

Honorable mentions

Here are other notable championship finishes. To see a complete description, visit us online at NCAACHampionMagazine.org.

1984 – Division I Men's Hockey: Bowling Green 5, Minnesota Duluth 4 (four overtimes)

1987 – Division I (Football Championship Subdivision): Louisiana-Monroe 43, Marshall 42

1987 – Division III Women's Cross Country Championship: Wisconsin-Oshkosh 81, St. Thomas (Minnesota) 81.

1992 – Division I Men's Lacrosse: Princeton 10, Syracuse 9 (double overtime)

1998 – Division I Women's Volleyball: Long Beach State 3, Penn State 2