

# Schalles: A Wrestling Legend

By Ron Bracken  
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**T**he numbers are staggering: 821 wins, 530 by fall. You can look 'em up. They're right there in the Guinness Book of Records. They belong to Wade Schalles.

The Wondrous One has pinned opponents from Russia to Rec Hall, Clarion to Cuba, Hollidaysburg to Haiti. He has scored pins around the clock, around the calendar, around the world.

But if you ask the ex-Hollidaysburg Golden Tiger which of those wins stands out most clearly in his mind, there is no hesitation, no mulling it over. It was the night in March of 1969 he pinned John Chatman in front of 8,000 fans in Rec Hall.

It was arguably the most electrifying bout in the history of the PIAA finals.

And it was at once a beginning and end for the cocky kid from Hollidaysburg who would go on to win four NCAA titles (two college division and two in Division I in 1972 and 1973), a world title, 16 national championships (10 times the Outstanding Wrestler), a Pan Am Games crown (OW) and the Russian Nationals (OW).

Schalles' Cinderella story traced its roots to another Cinderella Story which took place the year before.

In 1968 Schalles was a 138-pounder at Hollidaysburg who won a Sectional title and advanced to the District 6 tournament. But this was the year Steve Wiser, a sophomore from Bald Eagle Area who had finished the regular season at 7-5, would write his own unbelievable story. He won the district 138-pound title and went clear to the state finals. Schalles got knocked out of the districts by State College's Don Rockey in the semifinals.

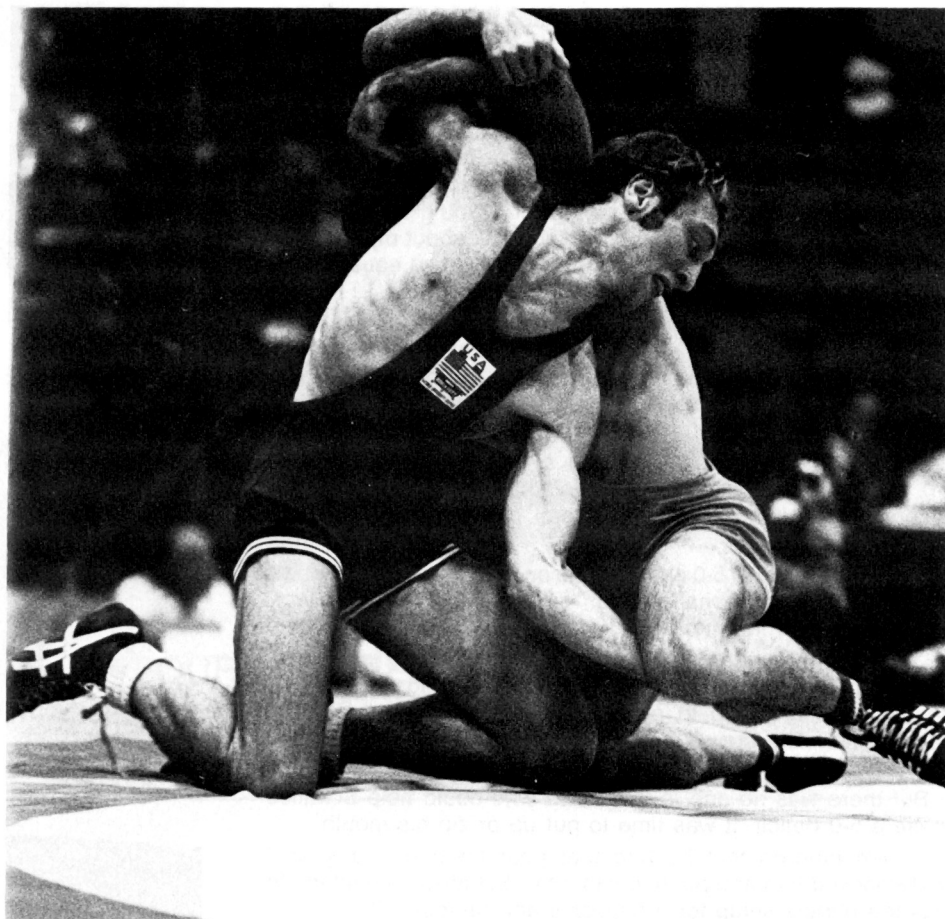
Two weeks later he was in the stands in Rec Hall watching this hot-shot sophomore from Trinity everyone called Bimbo win his first state title. Most everyone agreed that John Chatman was a mortal lock to win two more.

A card-carrying nonconformist, Schalles didn't see it like that.

"I was sitting with Gary McCarthy, who coached at the YMCA in Hollidaysburg and who taught me everything I knew about technique at that time," Schalles recalled. "I was really upset because in the districts I was looking ahead to wrestling Wiser, whom I had beaten earlier in the season, and Rocky beat me.

"Anyway, Gary and I were watching Chatman and he just manhandled everyone; he dominated the tournament. Gary pointed to him and said, 'That boy is ready for the Olympics right now. He's the class of this tournament.'

"That really hurt because he had never said anything like that to me. So I made up



*Wade shoots for takedown against Russian opponent in Soviet Wrestling Olympics in Tbilisi.*

my mind right there that Chatman was the one I wanted the next year. If he went up two weights then I was going up two weights but I was gonna get him. I was not going to sit in those stands and watch the finals again."

Across the winter of 1968-69, Schalles kept track of Chatman, who had moved up from 145 to 154. Schalles' natural weight was around 154, which made it easy for him to keep pace with Chatman, who was fast becoming a legend in the WPIAL.

Not content to rely on word of mouth and newspaper clippings, Schalles drove to Washington to scout Chatman personally. He picked a bad night.

"They were wrestling Canon-MacMillan and when I got there at 6 the doors had already been locked for an hour," he said. "I begged and pleaded with the ticket-taker, telling her how I had just driven four hours to see this match, and she finally gave in and let me in.

"So there I was in the stands with my movie camera and Chatman's match only lasted 38 seconds. But in that time I saw that he had a very poor fireman's carry. I remembered that."

Schalles also remembered being singled out for derision that night.

"The guy sitting beside me asked me what I was doing there with a movie camera," he said. "I told him I was from Central Pennsylvania, that I wrestled and that I was going to beat Chatman. He started to laugh and it took about 30 seconds for that story to circulate the whole way around the gym. People were laughing and pointing fingers at me."

The next time Schalles saw Chatman he was on the opposite mat in Rec Hall in the PIAA semifinals.

"I can remember it as if it was yesterday. He went out on the mat and the next time I looked over he was walking off," Schalles said. "He pinned his guy in 30 seconds and I was struggling with Al Snellman. Looking back, I'm not sure I didn't wrestle the best guy in the semis. But I won and as I was walking off the mat I was thinking, 'Well, big-mouth, you went and did it. You said you wanted him and now you've got him. It's not on paper anymore. There's no more talk.' I was wondering if my mouth hadn't gotten me in trouble. Then, I figured it was time to start preparing for him."

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During the course of the tournaments Schalles had become friends with Dan and Dave Clark of Clearfield. Both had been in the states the year before and Dave had won. This year Dave was beaten by Les Peterson in the finals at 120, 10-9.

"They were sitting behind the bleachers and I went over to talk with them. I said to Dave, 'Let me see your medal.' And in unison, they both said, 'No. That's a second-place medal and you're not going to look at it. You're going to get the gold medal. Out of our region, you're going to be the state champ.' And just like that my butterflies went away," he said, rolling back the years.

"I knew there would be pressure, that the majority of the conversation up in the stands and out around the hot dog stands was about the 154-pound match. But after I talked to the Clarks there were three or four matches left before mine and that gave me a chance to get my mental game down, to think about my strategy. And I thought to myself, 'You can win. If you weren't equal to him you wouldn't be here.'

"I knew if I didn't get pinned in the first period I could beat him. He liked to go in on that deep double-leg, pick the guy up, put a half-nelson on him while he had him in the air and bring down so that the first thing that touched the mat was the guy's shoulders. I knew if I didn't get in trouble like that I would win."

By the time the first period was over Schalles was losing, 4-0. Chatman had taken him down to his back. Early in the second period it was 5-0 as Chatman blew off the bottom for an escape.

"There I was, down 5-0 and we were on our feet, and I was down in the third period," Schalles said. "I didn't want him on his feet, I wanted him on the mat.

"But I think the turning point of the match came in the first period when he got the nearfall. That really helped me because he didn't do anything to put me there, he didn't earn those back points. The crowd didn't think so either and that turned them in my favor."

But there was no one in the crowd who could help Schalles erase a 5-0 deficit. It was time to put up or zip his mouth.

"I remembered that he had that poor fireman's carry so I underhooked him and pushed into him," Schalles recounted. "It was the perfect setup for a fireman's and he took it."

And Schalles countered him and took him down. Twice he turned Chatman but the referee awarded no back points, making it 5-2 heading into the final two minutes.

"When I didn't get the back points that got the crowd fired up; I think everyone was rooting for me except for John's parents," Schalles said. "I think the apple started to form in his throat when I had him down and the crowd was getting on him.

"The tide was slowly changing. David was finally getting a shot at Goliath. It was the classic professional wrestling script."

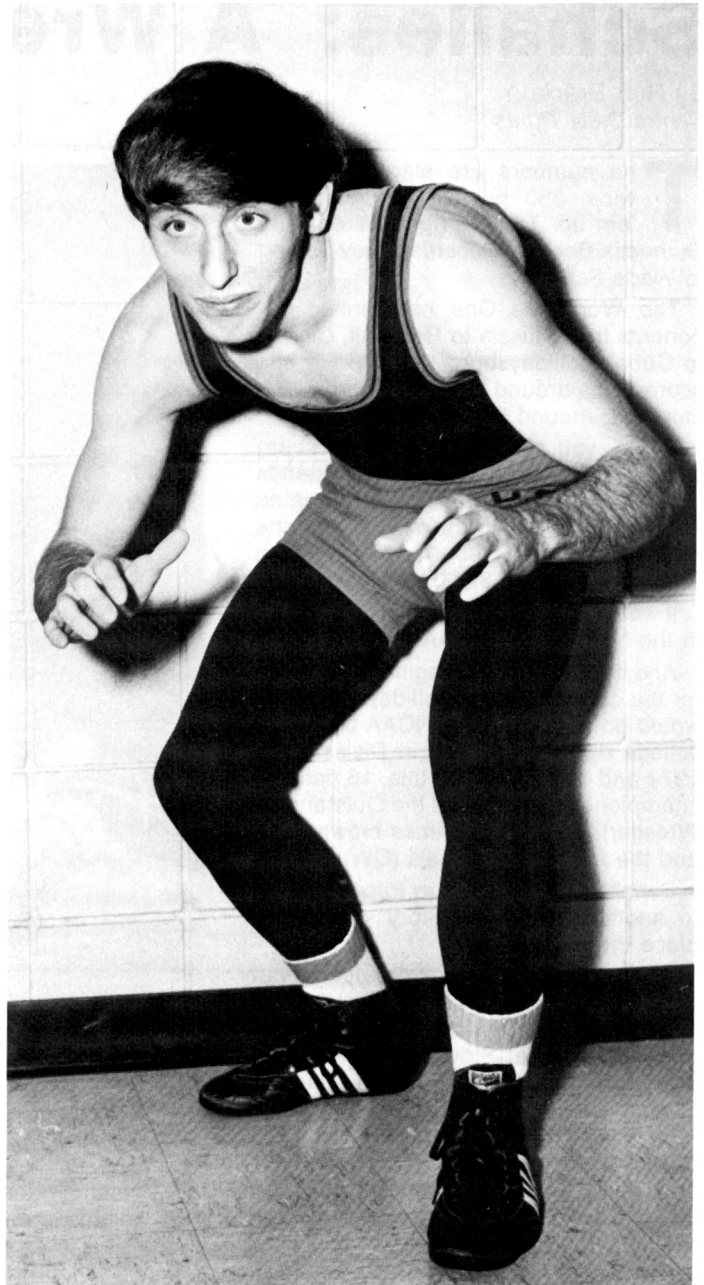
But it needed an ending. It didn't take Schalles long to write one. Chatman got careless in his ride and Schalles leaned back into him, elevated him and reversed him to his back.

"When I kicked him over I knew that made it 5-4 and I had to get two points to make it 6-5," Schalles said. "I knew he had 1:42 in riding time and I had 1:10 so I wasn't going to assume that I was going to get riding time. When I put him on his back I knew that I had the gold medal in my pocket. He was *not* going to get off his back, he was *not* going to reverse me, he was *not* going to escape. I just latched on to him and held him there. I wasn't even thinking about pinning him."

But he did, at the 4:58 mark. And that sent Rec Hall into a frenzy and a lot of people reaching for their wallets to pay up. Schalles said he personally knew of one woman who won \$5,000 in wagers on the match.

But you couldn't put a price tag on the value of the victory to Schalles' career. He wouldn't even try.

"It was my greatest thrill," he said. "That was the one tournament that shot me up the ladder the farthest. It's like asking Howard Hughes about making money. It's the first million that



*Wade shows his championship stance while at Clarion.*

he would remember, not the 32nd. It's the first one that gets you over the hump; it means you've made it.

"Up until that time if you wrestled at Hollidaysburg and became a district champion you were well thought of as an athlete. That was as high an accomplishment as anyone in Hollidaysburg thought they could aspire to. You didn't talk about being a state champion like they do in State College or Clearfield or Easton. Even thinking about being a regional champion was a pipe dream and a state championship was so far above a dream you didn't think about it.

"But when I won it, that catapulted me to a level where I could say, 'Hey, I am good.'"

After the bouts were over and the mat was being removed from the floor of Rec Hall that March night 17 years ago, Schalles was busily accepting congratulations from fans when a man who looked vaguely familiar came up to him.

"He told me he was the person who sat next to me that night at Trinity when I was filming that match," Schalles said. "He said, 'I laughed at you that night. I remembered you. And now I just want to say congratulations.'"