

Going Deep: Ravens' Ray Lewis and Kelly Gregg use wrestling background to succeed in the NFL

Ray Lewis' eyes were like saucers. He wore the look of a warrior.

But Lewis wasn't sizing up a tight end going over the middle. He wasn't trying to dislodge a running back from the ball. The Baltimore Ravens all-world linebacker wasn't even on the field of play, nor was he talking about football.

Decked out in gray sweat pants and a black University of Miami sweatshirt, Lewis was clearly intense when speaking about a sport close to his heart, one that he says has made him the ferocious and technically sound NFL player he is today: wrestling.

"That has been my key for a long time," said Lewis, who won the Florida state title at 189 pounds in 1993 while at Kathleen High School in Lakeland. "Wrestling is still one of the reasons why I swivel my hips; it's been everything for me.

"The principles that you learn in wrestling, none of that changes. It carries over, and if you stick to those things, the low man always wins."

Lewis isn't alone.

The number of past and present pro football players who have a high school or college wrestling background is sizable. It includes Hall of Famers Ronnie Lott, Bruce Smith and Larry Csonka, former Pro Bowl players such as Bo Jackson and Tony Siragusa and current players Roddy White, Adam Vinatieri and former Cedar Cliff standout Coy Wire. Former Cedar Cliff star Steve Seftor was an all-America wrestler at Penn State and a defensive end on Joe Paterno's first national championship football team.

Other NFL stars, such as former Pittsburgh guard Carlton Haselrig — who won six NCAA titles, three in Division I and three in Division II — and current New England guard Stephen Neal, a two-time NCAA champ from Cal Bakersfield, didn't play football in college but made the transition to the rugged NFL trenches.

For Lewis, this elite fraternity extends across the locker room. Ravens nose tackle Kelly Gregg, winner of three straight Oklahoma state heavyweight titles while at Edmond Memorial and then Edmond North High School from 1993 to 1995, knows the benefits wrestling has had on his football career.

"There are a lot of good wrestlers that come through here," Gregg said. "Honestly, I don't think I would still be playing now if it wasn't for my wrestling background."

Hand in hand

Football and wrestling seem like totally different disciplines, but they are very similar in many ways.

If you are a linebacker, like Lewis, you use your hands to fend off blockers and zero in on ball carriers. If you are an offensive or defensive lineman, in the case of Gregg, you occupy space and don't want to get blown backward off the ball.

Lewis and Gregg have used the techniques they learned on the high school mats to make the transition from wrestling to football.

Lewis, who was drafted out of Miami by the Ravens in 1996, has terrorized opposing players throughout his 15-year career. He has amassed more than 1,500 tackles, has been named to the Pro Bowl 11 times, and even bagged Super Bowl MVP honors in 2001.

Some of those numbers can be attributed to brute strength and his unmatched determination and passion toward the game. But that only scratches the surface of what makes a Lewis tackle so textbook.

He wraps up. He doesn't let go. He rarely, if ever, loses a battle and almost never lets a running back or receiver wiggle away.

And he does all of this after taking on a bigger lineman. But that doesn't bother Lewis, who was accustomed to moving up one and sometimes two weight classes while wrestling in high school.

"[Wrestling] teaches you what most people want to do, which is make your hips and butt work for you," said Lewis, demonstrating a wrestling shoot position into a one-legged takedown. "You always want to go low; you never want to walk up to an opponent standing up.

"Everything has to be engaged. You have to be locked and loaded. That is what makes you shift so easy. Football is that natural shoot and tackle."

Lewis hasn't forgotten the basics, and neither has Gregg.

Throughout his wrestling and football careers, Gregg has been *undersized*. Yet he finished his high school wrestling career with a 58-match winning streak and a 23-0 season to capture his third state wrestling title.

Listed at a generous 6-0, he could have chosen either direction — a football or wrestling scholarship — in college. He chose football and never looked back.

"Wrestling is my favorite sport, but when the University of Oklahoma comes to a kid in Oklahoma, I mean, every kid wants to play for the Sooners," Gregg said. "There are a lot more opportunities in football than there are in wrestling."

True. But that doesn't stop college coaches at high-profile programs from swooping in and picking up wrestlers to help carry their football teams to a BCS title.

Ohio State's Jim Tressel is one example. He has stated on more than one occasion to local high school recruits and coaches that he would rather recruit a football player who has a wrestling background than one who doesn't.

Although it is too tough to handle both sports at the college level, Tressel admires the work ethic and toughness wrestlers display. To him, they are a different breed of athlete.

Gregg tried to double dip during his freshman year in college. He signed up to wrestle for OU after the Sooners went 5-5-1 in football, but it was a short stint. The following year, he was back to focusing on opposing running backs and his days on the mat were done.

But not forgotten.

Gregg never lost what he learned while wrestling. And it's the main reason he has been a member of the Ravens for 10 seasons after being drafted by Cincinnati and playing one full year in Philadelphia.

"It's balance and hand placement," said Gregg, who has 503 tackles since joining the Ravens. "You are in a lot of close contact with other guys. You have to have a lot of leverage when you are a defensive lineman. There are a lot of correlations between football and wrestling.

"I tell a lot of young kids that play football to wrestle. There is no reason to specialize until you get to college."

Unmatched toughness

Imagine sitting in your bedroom and pulling out a deck of cards. For every card you pull, you do situps and pushups to match the number on the card.

Now imagine going through the deck one, two and sometimes three times in one night. That is what Lewis did, according to Gary Lineberger, who was an assistant football coach at Kathleen High when Lewis was there and is now the athletic director at the school.

“He was the same guy you see on Sunday afternoon,” Lineberger said. “That work ethic was always there, and I think wrestling and football went hand in hand for Ray.

“He always walked out on the football field with a smile on his face. He never asked for a day off. He always wanted to be out there.”

And usually was.

His senior year, Lewis played linebacker, returned punts and kickoffs and played tailback when two other players got hurt. He ran for more than 800 yards that year.

Lewis never lacked stamina. He always embraced big-game situations, even winning two games that year with kick returns. But it was the discipline he learned on the wrestling mat that allowed him to perform and get everything out of his body on the field.

A true wrestler in any other sport, it’s like night and day,” Lewis said. “Being a pure wrestler, it’s a different commitment.”

Gregg understands.

When he was in high school, he wrestled in season and all summer. Without a break, he went into football season and started the process all over again, never missing a beat.

Gregg’s work ethic and extreme will and desire to overcome his height, both in football and wrestling, are what stand out to Archie Randall, Gregg’s summer wrestling coach and now the wrestling coach at Oklahoma City University.

“He came to me and said he wanted to be on our summer nationals team,” Randall said. “I was like ‘OK, Kelly,’ and was thinking ‘Yeah, right.’

“He made the team and won four national freestyle championships. I always tell people that wrestling is good for shoulder strength and keeping you in position. That is what you want for a defensive lineman. Kelly was one of those one-in-a-million [athletes] you get.”

And Gregg can go all day.

When he feels tired at a Ravens practice, he always looks back on his wrestling career for inspiration. Immediately, he comes to life.

There is just no comparison between going six minutes on the mat during a practice, running sprints, going back for another six minutes and then going to another stamina-building drill.

“You are out there by yourself, all alone,” Gregg said. “There is no help there for you. No team can bail you out. It’s a very individual sport, and how much work you put into it is how much you get out of it. It’s a tough business.

“I always tell myself that, if I can make it through a wrestling practice, I can make it through any football practice. You are there with no breaks. Wrestlers have to be tough to make it through.”

Lewis and Gregg have done that and more.

Both continue to excel on the football field. They have both probably lost a step, but they make up for that with experience and being smarter.

And never forgetting their roots on the mat.