



In Search Of Z. B. Strebler

By Bill Mallon

I am his Captain Ahab. He is my White Whale. For 20 years now I have been searching for Z. B. Strebler sans success. Who was Z. B. Strebler?

Z. B. Strebler competed in the 1904 Olympic Games as a wrestler. In the 125 lb (56.8 kg.) class he finished third, winning the bronze medal. In the 135 lb. (61.4 kg.) class he did not fare as well, losing his only match to Theodore McLear and was eliminated from the tournament. We actually know little of Strebler's participation at 125 lbs. He lost his first match in that class to Isidor "Jack" Niflot. There is no record that he competed again.

But in one class (135 lbs.) there is a third-place tournament, and even though I've never been able to find other such consolation tournaments for the 1904 Olympics, it is assumed that such second- and third-place tournaments existed in 1904 to determine the silver and bronze medallists. It would have been difficult for Strebler to have earned a bronze medal in the 125 lb. class without such a tournament. After defeating Strebler, Niflot defeated J. M. Cardwell and then, in the final, beat August Wester. The records have Wester winning the silver medal. In the 135 lb. class tournament, the winner was Benjamin Bradshaw, who defeated Theodore McLear in the final. They are listed the gold and silver medallists. The bronze medal match was between Charles Clapper, who won it, and Frederick Ferguson Clapper and Ferguson shared the distinction that they had fought against Bradshaw and lost to him. This would have been a variant of the Bergdahl System, allowing the wrestlers who lost to the champion to fight off for

lesser places. If this were so in the 125 lb. class, then Z. B. Strebler would have wrestled J. M. Cardwell for third place and, presumably, defeated him.

So what is so important or interesting about Z. B. Strebler? He is the only United States' Olympic medallist in an individual event, for which the full name is not known. Every record source, with rare exceptions, lists him only as Z. B. Strebler.

The well-known exceptions are recent versions of David Wallechinsky's book "The Complete Book of the Olympics," in which he has him as Zenon Strebler. But I do not believe that name. I know David and trust him a great deal, but we both know the source on this one. Wolf Lyberg also lists Strebler as "Zenon" in his multi-volume monograph of Olympic athletes. Wallechinsky used Lyberg as his source for Zenon. Lyberg used materials from the archives of the late Swedish Olympic researcher, Lennart Dahllöf, and Zenon Strebler is presumably from Dahllöf. Dahllöf was a voracious researcher and found many things that have eluded others. But he also found many, many first, or given, names not available in any source we know of. David, Wolf, and I have raised an eyebrow occasionally and commented that it may not be best to always trust some of those names that seemingly "came out of nowhere." I'm certain that Zenon Strebler is such an example, because of my own efforts to find his name.

For almost 20 years now I have tried to find out more about him. We know so little. In the program to the 1904 Olympic wrestling events he is

listed as representing the South Broadway Athletic Club in St. Louis. The club no longer exists. There is nothing else.

My search has led me to the cemeteries in the city of St. Louis, with no sign of Z. B. Strebler. I have looked through the city directories for the era 1900-1910 and found nothing resembling the name. The 1890 and 1900 censuses for Missouri have been searched to no avail. The Social Security Death Index lists all U.S. citizens dying after 1964 with a recognized Social Security number. He is not listed therein. Social Security began in the 1930s, so perhaps he never got a number, or perhaps he passed away prior to 1964.

On the Internet I have checked numerous genealogy lists, starting with the omnibus "Cyndi's List." Using national telephone directories now available on the Net and via CD, I have found every listing of Strebler in the country—its not terribly common. Letters to these families have invariably not been answered and those that were provided no help. I finally found a Strebler on the Internet doing a genealogical history of his family. But even he had not heard of Z. B. Strebler.

Perhaps the name is wrong? I've considered this for many years. Newspapers made numerous typos in those days. The "Z.B." could as easily have been "C.B." or "C.D." or "Z.V." or any variant number of homonyms. Further, the Strebler could also be wrong and the most likely error would be that his name was Stressler. Either name is very German and if he spelled it with the German ß, as in Streßler, an American typesetter would likely have interpreted it as Strebler, and not the more correct Stressler. (This occurred at the Olympics as late as 1984 with Michael Groß, who was listed in some sources as Michael Grob.)

But the various homonyms for the initials and trying Stressler also did not help. Stressler turns out to be much less common than Strebler in the United States. All the variant combinations of the possible different spellings have been searched in all the above sources, but the White Whale is still out there. One name that has never been seen in any source is Zenon Strebler, which confirms my suspicion that the name is incorrect. Finally, I asked for help from Ishmael. Late in 2000, I hired a professional genealogist to help with the quest for Z. B. Strebler. Sadly, he too struck out after retracing my own roots and looking at many of the same sources I had. In late April 2001, the records of the many European immigrants who had entered the United States via Ellis Island became available on the Internet (www.ellislandrecords.org). I've looked there for Strebler.

There were about 14 who had entered the U.S. at that site with that name, but only four prior to 1904 and none of them come close to "Z. B." Checking Stressler also revealed no matches.

I do not know Z. B. Strebler's full name. But I now have a theory about his life. The sources we have checked should have turned up something, if he was here for any length of time. But instead I suspect his stay in the United States was ephemeral. Many, many German immigrants came to America in the late nineteenth century, and Strebler was probably one of them. As he left so few clues to his life, it would seem most likely that shortly after his arrival here he returned to his origins, somewhere in Europe—probably Germany, Austria, or Switzerland.

I feel somewhat like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid as they were being chased in the 1969 movie. Z. B. Strebler? Who is that guy?

Mr. Strebler, if you're out there, or your relatives are, could you possibly show your face and let us know a bit more about you?

Next Issue of the *Journal*

Because Tony Bijkerk is resuming his role as interim editor of the *Journal of Olympic History*, starting with the next issue, it is important that all articles be sent to him. Also, any correspondence or queries regarding our publication should be directed toward Tony. His address is as follows:

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As Tony mentioned in his Message from the Secretary-General (please see page 2), Anthony Edgar has rejoined the *Journal's* editorial staff as associate editor and will help with editing and design. Anthony's work on the *Journal* as an ISOH member during the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney proved superlative, and we welcome him back on board. (*Stephen L. Harris*)