



In Memorium:

A Tribute to Frank Andersson

Steven Fraser



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A TRIBUTE TO FRANK ANDERSSON (1956-2018)

Steven Fraser

sfraser@usawrestling.org

We Must Enjoy the Journey

In honor of Frank Andersson, three-time World Champion and Olympic bronze medalist from Sweden, who at 62 years old recently passed away, I would like to share a small glimpse of my experience knowing him. Frank Andersson was a powerful, golden-haired athlete, who enjoyed the status of a movie star in Sweden and who had claimed the World championship in 1979, 1981 and 1982. In 1984, with his great strength and technique, his quickness, and his superb sense of balance, Andersson had devastated his first three opponents in the Los Angeles Olympic Games. Each of Andersson's foes had served as a target for his most breathtaking and crowd-pleasing throw, the high-arching "back suplex." I had beaten my first two opponents and was slated to wrestle Andersson next.

I liked and admired Frank Andersson. I had met him for the first time several years earlier, in the United States National Wrestling Championships in Albany, N.Y. He was a big star even then, and his image as a playboy was firmly established. I was a college sophomore and basically a nobody. I met Andersson through a friend of mine, Mike Chastain of Troy, Michigan, a very good wrestler who had been blinded in a childhood accident. Andersson beat Mike in the National Championships in Albany, and I think he felt sorry for him. In a gesture of friendship and sportsmanship, the Swede invited Mike up to his hotel room that evening for a visit. When Mike asked if I would like to accompany him, I didn't hesitate to say yes. So what if I was tagging along. I was eager to meet Frank Andersson too.

The Swede came to the door, greeted us warmly in English, which he spoke very well, and put his arm around Mike's shoulders, the way Europeans often do. Now that he had cleaned up and changed into his fashionable clothes and leather slacks, he looked even more like a movie star. He was good looking, with pearly white teeth and blond, curly locks that fell almost to his shoulders. His hair was layered in the back, like a movie star's. He was really a Hollywood type. His hair would have been in style in Hollywood, I suppose, but it was a radical departure from the clean-cut look favored by most world-class wrestlers. I could tell just by looking at him that he enjoyed his life, and that he lived in a much faster world than I did.

When we sat down to talk and he lit up a cigarette, my eyes nearly popped out. I knew he couldn't have smoked very much, because wrestlers who smoke don't have the endurance to get very far. But to see him smoking even one cigarette was a shock for me. In between puffs on his cigarette, Andersson showed us rookies a thing or two. In the middle of the room, all spiffed up in his leather pants, he grabbed Mike around the waist and showed him a tricky little move that might help him during some wrestling match down the road. In Greco-Roman wrestling, you're not allowed to use your legs, and when you're fairly inexperienced in Greco-Roman, as Mike and I were, you're very careful to obey that rule to a T. But Andersson had been around a while, and he was showing Mike and me a way to use our legs legally. Twisting in close to Mike, he used his own leg to raise Mike's thigh and throw Mike off balance. But in the flurry of activity, it was impossible to detect whether Andersson had really used his leg to lift Mike, or whether Mike, fighting for balance, had lifted up on his own accord.

Mike Chastain and I were in awe. Here we were with one of the best wrestlers in the world, and he was sharing the secrets of the trade he knew so well. We took advantage of his generosity and asked plenty of questions, and Andersson was kind and patient enough to answer them. One answer in particular I have never forgotten. "What does it take," we asked, "to be a great wrestler?" Andersson leaned forward and looked at us, his eyes gleaming. For a moment, he said nothing, allowing the suspense to build. This was going to be the ultimate statement, I thought to myself. He's going to say something about running or lifting weights or strengthening your back. Then Andersson answered. "It takes drinking beer, getting in trouble with the police, and having sex with women." My jaw must have dropped a mile. But I certainly didn't challenge him. Who was I to challenge one of the best wrestlers in the world?

Obviously, I never took Andersson's statement literally. But there was an underlying message in his words that has always been helpful to me. The Swede didn't really mean that you had to drink beer and get in trouble to be good; he meant that you must enjoy life if you want to succeed. Perhaps my idea of fun and Andersson's idea of fun were two different things. But he understood a truth that I did not fully appreciate at the time. He knew that if the long, hard path to success is not enjoyable, the pot of gold at the end is not worth having.

Back to 1984; I was fortunate enough to upset Frank Andersson in the quarterfinals of the Olympic Games, by a score of 4 – 1, and I went on to win the gold the next evening. I will always be grateful to this great World Champion from Sweden. I know he will be missed by - not only Swedes - but by many friends and fans around the world. RIP, Frank Andersson, affectionately known as Franky Boy.

Steven Fraser
Former Head Coach USA Greco Roman
Olympic Champion