

A closer look at the “Rig”-One of the Top 100 College Athletes of All Time

By Joe Baranik for PWN

Carlton Haselrig may go down as one of the best college athletes of all time. He certainly would rank in my top 50. In fact, he was voted among 14 others to the 75th NCAA Anniversary Wrestling Team in 2005. A collective action poster of all 15 was given out at the 2005 NCAA tournament. Unfortunately his life was way too short. He passed away on July 22 from a battle with stomach issues he had been having the last six years. The “Rig” from Johnstown, PA was 54 years old.

Haselrig had an unusual junior high and high school career in football and wrestling. Because of the Johnstown flood, sports at Johnstown were discontinued for a couple of years. The “Rig” started wrestling in his junior high years, although the football program was started back up at Johnstown High School, the wrestling program was not brought back until after Carlton graduated from HS. A local business man offered to sponsor Carlton to wrestle for Johnstown High in his senior year in 1984. The school allowed him to be a one man team as he wrestled in the Districts, Regionals and States to finish 10-0 and win a PIAA State title for JHS.

After high school, Haselrig attended Lock Haven University to play football and wrestle. He injured his knee during football season and after surgery in Johnstown over the Christmas break, he decided to transfer to the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown and wrestle for legendary coach Pat Pecora. Pecora became the all-time leader in college wins (617) on Feb. 7, 2020 among all NCAA, NAIA and Junior College divisions. UPJ doesn't have a football program, so the “Rig” concentrated on wrestling, which is an understatement. He went on to have an outstanding freshman year, losing only twice to Dean Hall of Div. I Edinboro at the 285 lb. weight class and placing 3rd at the Div. II NCAA tournament. Haselrig went on to avenge his 2 losses to Hall by overpowering him the last three times they wrestled. After his first year on the college mats, a star was born. Carlton went on to win 122 straight bouts, an NCAA record, and become the only wrestler in history to win six NCAA titles (3 in Div. II and 3 in Div. I), while getting revenge on Hall who he defeated twice his sophomore year, including a last second takedown in the NCAA finals to win 8-6. Carlton also beat Hall in the NCAA qualifier finals 11-8. Haselrig never lost or tied a bout in Div. II. The “Rig” defeated such heavyweight greats as 2x NCAA and Olympic champion Kurt Angle, Joel Greenlee of Northern Iowa (2x AA, Midlands champion, CR of 127-16-4) who he tied and defeated twice, Rod Severn of Arizona St. who he beat twice (Severn was a 2x AA at Arizona St. and Olympic alternate in 1980-'84 - '88) and Dave Orndorff of Oregon State for an overall collegiate record of 143-2-1, including 83 pins, for the Mountain Cats.

After college, despite not having played football since high school, Haselrig was selected by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 12th round of the 1989 National Football League Draft. His first year, he was on the developmental squad, his second year he was a full member of the Steelers, he started his 3rd year with the team and he made All-Pro his 4th year in the league! Number 77 was captain of the O-line as an offensive guard (called out plays for the lineman). Then in 1992 he was selected to the Pro Bowl for blocking for NFL rushing leader at the time, Barry Foster. He also played one season with the New York Jets, where again he was captain of the line before his NFL career ended because of off-field issues with drugs and alcohol, which he would eventually overcome.

After his football career, the “Rig” played Arena Football for a bit and won a belt in mixed martial arts in a short career where he went 3-2. He continued to train fighters and wrestlers at Cold Steel MMA & Wrestler in Johnstown, before returning to his alma mater as a varsity assistant coach for football and wrestling.

Haselrig is a Distinguished Member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, inducted in June of 2016.

A biography published last year – “Giant Killer: The Carlton Haselrig Story,” by Kevin Emily – detailed Haselrig’s rise to fame, his struggles with substance abuse and his recovery.

In 2018, Haselrig was featured in the National Wrestling Hall of Fame’s “Wrestling and Football” exhibit at the NCAA Wrestling Fan Fest. He joined Pro Football Hall of Fame member and NCAA wrestling champion Curley Culp, two-time wrestling All-American and 14-year National Football League veteran Bob Golic, and two-time NCAA wrestling champion, three-time Super Bowl Champion and Distinguished Member Stephen Neal in an on-stage discussion about how wrestling played an instrumental role in their success on the gridiron.

I had an opportunity to do a Q and A with his college coach and close friend Pat Pecora, who also serves as the Athletic Director at Pitt-Johnstown.

JB: I had a chance to talk with Carlton at your summer camps at UPJ and I talked with him a couple of times at the NCAA Div. I Wrestling Championships recently. I also interviewed him for a story in the Pennsylvania Wrestling Newsmagazine two years ago. He seems like the nicest guy in the world, very humble and sincere. What was he like on campus and with his teammates?

Pat: He was extremely humble and never wanted to be the center of attention. He did everything his teammates did including running the 3.5 mile cross country course, which is unusual for a heavyweight wrestler weighing close to 270 lbs. He would also run the steep ski slope on campus and keep up with the lightweights on the team.

JB: When did you discover that the “Rig” was something special?

Pat: In his red-shirt freshman year we wrestled at Clarion in front of a packed crowd. I had stated to the media before the dual that if the match came down to heavyweight, I thought we would have a chance to win. The media was stunned as was Kurt Angle’s Mom, who thought Kurt was going to be the next big star at Clarion because of his success in high school. Sure enough, the dual came down to heavyweight and Carlton outmanned Kurt Angle going away 9-3 and UPJ won the dual. To be honest, I didn’t want Carlton to slam him or hurt his chances for a good individual win, and for us to get a team win. He also beat Angle in the Wilkes Open final that year. We had a special relationship on and off the mat, he was part of my family and I was part of his family. He was very coachable and would listen intently. Basically, he would do whatever I taught him.

JB: You coached Jody & John Strittmatter among several other national champions and great athletes. Was the “Rig” the best you ever coached?

Pat: Yes. He was blessed with immense physical talent, but he demonstrated the work ethic to go along with that talent. An example of that was after our practices our team would run sprints in the gym with the basketball team. At 265 lbs., no one could beat Carlton. He would wrestle with the lightweights, so he had to be in shape to keep their pace. But beyond his physical talent and work ethic, he had great mental focus. He didn’t understand that coming from a small school was a disadvantage. He thought he was on the same playing field so to speak. The same with making it into the NFL. He thought in his mind that he had just as good a chance to make the Pros as someone who played football for four years at a big school!

JB: Did you scout Carlton’s opponents to try and get an edge in competition?

Pat: We never looked at a bracket, we never cared what he was seeded. I figured they have to put someone on the other side of the mat, and we were ready for all comers.

JB: I understand you and Bruce Haselrig, Carlton’s uncle and PIAA and NCAA wrestling official, helped Carlton get drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers. How did that come about?

Pat: Carlton had an itching to get back into football his senior year and he wanted to transfer to the University of Pittsburgh so he could play football and wrestle. I told him to stay put and get his degree and that I would help him get drafted. We were just hoping for a chance for him to be drafted or move up to the NFL as a free agent. I knew a football scout for the Detroit Lions and he told me how to go about getting Carlton a tryout. I sent letters out telling the scouts the date and time of the tryout. Four scouts showed up, including well respected scout, Tom Donahue, from the Pittsburgh Steelers. When Donahue saw the “Rig,” he said he hadn’t seen shoulders like that since Mean Joe Green. It was pouring down raining outside, and the scouts were getting impatient. They went inside the gym and told Carlton to run the length of the gym when he was ready. They had their stop watches in hand. After the first run, they couldn’t believe the time and compared watches. Each time, Carlton ran faster and the scouts were jumping up and down in excitement. Then they decided to put him through a full combine with agility drills, muscular endurance and weight training. At the end of the day, three of the scouts said they would draft him as a free agent. Donahue from the Steelers decided to stay back and talk more with Coach Pecora. They went to a local restaurant in Johnstown called the Alibi. Mr. Donahue asked Coach P. what he thought about his competitiveness and Coach P. said you can take anyone from the Steelers and put them in that room over there with Carlton, I know which one would come out! After that, Donahue said the Steelers would draft him. The “Rig” was drafted in the 12th round.

JB: Did you attend all of his home games with the Steelers?

Pat: Yes, and most of the away games. We had a special bond. I was proud of him. What an opportunity to play with the Steelers and their successful legacy under Coaches Chuck Noll and Bill Cowher.

JB: How did you feel when you found out Carlton got involved with drugs and alcohol? Did he party in college?

Pat: Carlton worked very hard in college, almost 12 months a year. He didn’t have too much time to party and keep his body in shape. Once he went from no money to all the money he earned in the NFL, he started living a different lifestyle and it caught up with him.

JB: Did you ever consider him to be on your staff?

Pat: He would come by and workout with us quite often, work summer camps and volunteer his time at matches. We never had a full-time assistant, so I was unable to put him on our staff.

JB: I find it amazing that two people from such a small school as Pittsburgh at Johnstown hold two records that may never be broken. You possess the most victories of any college wrestling coach in any NCAA, NAIA or Junior College division with 618 wins, and Carlton has the most NCAA titles with six! Can you speak to this remarkable feat?

Pat: We worked together as team. In fact, he was our first baby-sitter for our daughter Cristina. He put me on the map and I put him on the map. I always tell our team you don’t win titles on your own. Every person in this practice room contributes to your success. Our philosophy is that we’re going to accomplish goals together as a whole team which may not have been possible as individuals. I may not have the college wrestling wins record and Carlton may not be the only college wrestler to win six NCAA Championships. We win together as a family.

JB: Describe Carlton Haselrig’s funeral.

Pat: We celebrated his life and achievements. Tom Donahue sent a message on behalf of the Steelers. Former Steelers Tunch Ilkin and Jerry Olsavsky attended and each stayed a half hour sharing life experiences they had with Carlton. Steelers President Art Rooney III and Coach Tomlin sent floral arrangements. The Funeral was held at Johnstown High School’s Trojan Stadium. Because of Covid regulations, the crowd was capped at 250, but many fans and friends watched and listened from outside the stadium.