This weekend, hundreds of young Iowans will be going to The Barn. If you don't know what that means, gee whiz, you're about as clueless as ... I was exactly one year ago. The Barn is Veterans Auditorium in Des Moines, where the Amateur Athletic Union holds its state wrestling championship for kids eighth grade and under.

Wrestling, I now realize, is a pretty big deal in Iowa.

So intense is this sport that every match is an all-out test of physical endurance, requiring incredible strength to escape the humiliation of ending up flat on one's back, panting and helpless. And that's just for me - watching. So, as we prepare for this state championship, I help my sixth-grader focus on what's important: "It's not whether you win or lose," I tell him, "but whether the paramedics can revive me at the end of Round 3."

Maybe I'm just too old to have a youngster in such a mano-a-mano sport, but in the world of wrestling, I can't help feeling that I'm something of an outsider. And so, not incidentally, is my wrestler son.

At 54, I'm technically still middle age, but compared to the other parents at meets, I look like Moses in a warm-up jacket. My advanced age is the main reason my son became a wrestler: Last year he asked me to sign him up for basketball. I forgot.

Besides being older, I am somewhat less informed about the sport itself - make that completely ignorant.

Yet in Iowa, wrestling is a family tradition, and parents sit mat-side and provide a steady stream of (loud) advice to the boys straining and sweating inside the big circle.

"Throw your leg over him! Roll, roll, roll to your left." Meanwhile, I sit in mortified silence because I don't know what advice I'm supposed to yell.

"Don't get pinned! Get more points! Always wear clean underwear!"

A few weeks ago, in frustration, I told my son that just to look as though I fit in, I was planning to start calling in random instructions and warned him never to taken any of my suggestions. He promised he wouldn't.

So I'm just wrestling impaired. But why would my son be an outsider in Iowa wrestling? Gibrila is from Sierra Leone in West Africa. He's 12 and has been in America for about six years. This weekend, he will almost certainly be the darkest-complected person in the whole of Vets. He will be one of a mere handful of African-American wrestlers.

I wonder how it makes him feel. Is it uncomfortable for him? Does he feel different from the other kids? Does he even notice? I don't like to admit this, but at wrestling meets, Gibrila's racial difference tends to float around vaguely in the back of my mind. When he's exceptionally successful, I reflect that this does nothing to dispel the cultural stereotype of black youth in America. On those rare occasions when harsh feelings emerge - inevitable in such a competitive sport - I wonder whether race played a role.

So do my son and I feel the chill isolation of two unusual participants in the insular world of Iowa wrestling? Quite the opposite. I find wrestling meets surprisingly warm, sweaty boys notwithstanding. It seems that Iowa is generally welcoming to outsiders, and my wrestling experience does not contradict this. In just my second year of parenting a wrestler, it surprises me how at home I feel among families who've been doing this for generations.

I love the informal tradition that after the match, win or lose, each wrestler shakes the hand of his rival's coach or parent. So this weekend, I'm excited to say, my wife, son and I will pack up his gear and go happily to The Barn. And with any luck, all of us will come out alive.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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