

# WRESTLING ERICA

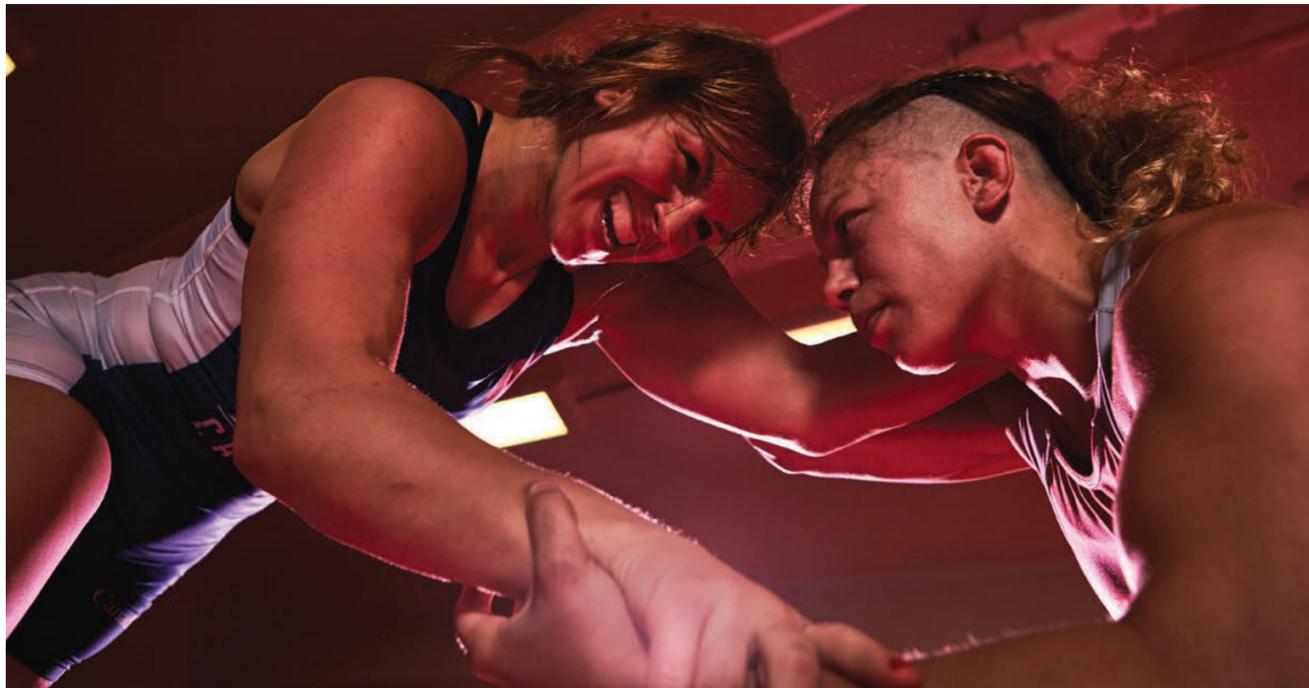
The Summer Olympics are just over a month away. For Erica Wiebe, it's already been a long trip to Rio, but she is heading south with renewed conviction.

By Marcello Di Cintio



photos by Colin Way

Erica Wiebe tussles with fellow Canadian Justine Bouchard.



## ERICA WIEBE IS BIGGER THAN ME.

I knew this before we met, of course. I knew that she occupied the 75-kg weight class—the heavyweight division—on Canada’s Olympic women’s wrestling team. But I never truly appreciated her physique until the moment we crouched in front of each other on the red mats in the University of Calgary’s wrestling room. Her grey T-shirt, already darkened with sweat from the warm up, was stretched tight over her round shoulders and broad upper back. I noticed her long and muscular arms, and her hard narrow torso. More than anything else, though, I noticed her legs. Wiebe’s muscled thighs bulged in her black tights like a pair of orcas.

“Ready?” she mumbled through her mouthguard. Then we stepped towards each other until our foreheads bumped together. Wiebe gripped the back of my neck with one hand and my upper arm with the other, and yanked me off balance with a quick snap of her wrists. Then, in one smooth motion, she pounced on my right leg, gripped it below the knee, and swept it up off the mat into her arms. I hopped on my free foot for a moment before Wiebe leaned her chest into my trapped thigh and crashed me into the mat. Then she followed me down.

I wrestled for the U of C when I was a student, but before tying up with Wiebe last spring, I hadn’t wrestled competitively for nearly 20 years. Seven years had passed since I last found my face pressed into the red vinyl. As I sniffed the familiar fragrance of sweat and disinfectant, Wiebe went to work on my legs. She jammed her shoulder into my hamstring, pulled my lower legs together and crossed them at the ankles. Then she twisted my legs against each other in an effort to flip me onto my back. I fought the laced ankle for a few seconds before inevitably giving in to the torque.

We stood up. I rubbed at the bruises already colouring my shins while Wiebe reached behind her head and tightened her ponytail. We faced each other a second time. Then Wiebe sprang on my leg again, plucking it off the mat as easily as a dandelion from a lawn.

**WIEBE BEGAN WRESTLING IN GRADE 9**, but soccer was her main focus growing up. During high school, Wiebe kept goal for the Ottawa Fury, an elite girl’s soccer club, and hoped to play for a U.S. college after graduation. Wrestling started to edge its way to the front of Wiebe’s passions in Grade 11. Her school wrestling team did not send anyone to her age-group nationals in St. John’s in 2005, so Wiebe and her mother flew to the tournament on their own. Wiebe won gold. She headed to Austria the following year for her first overseas competition. “That was the turning point,” Wiebe says. “Wrestling exposed me to all these cool, exciting things.” She decided she’d rather be a wrestler in Canada than a goalkeeper in the States.

Wiebe enrolled at the University of Calgary, home to one of the national training centres for women’s wrestling. Wiebe arrived in Calgary in September 2007 a few months ahead of Canada’s Olympic team selection tournament for the 2008 Beijing Games. “I was thrown into the mix with all these girls prepping for Olympic trials,” Wiebe says. “I would go into practice and get hammered. I thought it was really cool.”

Paul Ragusa, Calgary’s High Performance Centre coach and a former Olympian, has worked with Wiebe since she arrived in Calgary. Even from the start, her intensity in the practice room belied the stereotype of heavyweight wrestlers—male and female, both—who are not known for their work ethic. “As a coach, you are always trying to get the heavyweights to do more,” Ragusa says. “But Erica is a machine.” Erica’s personality, however, remains true to her weight class. Heavyweights are to wrestling what goaltenders are to hockey: they’re all a little bit weird. Wiebe’s natural heavyweight quirks, combined with her relative youth, led to the occasional conflict with coaches and teammates in her early days at U of C. “She didn’t always know when to joke around and when to be serious,” Ragusa says.

Wiebe’s attitude changed after she narrowly lost the Olympic team trials to teammate Leah Callahan in 2012. She started to mature into the role of a formidable wrestling force at international competitions. “She became very professional,” Ragusa said. Wiebe’s

star rose quickly. In 2014, her career-best year, Wiebe was crowned Commonwealth Games champion in Glasgow, won a gold medal at the University World Championships, and headed to the World Championships in Uzbekistan as one of the favourites.

But Wiebe faltered at Worlds. An Estonian wrestler Wiebe had beaten twice earlier that season threw her to her back in the first few seconds of their quarter-final match, then went on to pin her for the win. Wiebe couldn’t believe she’d ended such a successful year losing to a wrestler she knew she should beat.

**AS WIEBE AND I WRESTLED**, I was most impressed by her precision. Wiebe translates her power into smooth and exacting technique. My movements were unsure and frantic, and grew increasingly desperate as I tired. Wiebe, though, took no superfluous steps. Every twitch of her muscle was deliberate. Each grip of my wrist, every lunge for my leg formed part of a choreography Wiebe had performed thousands of times.

But Wiebe’s focus and precision have not always been consistent. “There are times, during some matches, when she is all over the place,” Ragusa said. “I can’t see what she is trying to do.” Ragusa believes that a lack of focus is one of the factors that cost Wiebe her match with the Estonian at Worlds, and this is something she and Ragusa have been working hard to fix. As Wiebe and I continued to practise, Ragusa encouraged her to maintain her body position, to fight away my hands to set up her attacks, and to finish her takedowns clean.

**THE 2015 SEASON STARTED WELL FOR WIEBE**. After coming in second at a tournament in Brazil, losing only to the world silver medalist, Wiebe went on to earn consecutive gold medals in tournaments in Calgary, Russia and Sweden. By the end of the winter, Wiebe was ranked among the top wrestlers in the world for her weight class, exactly

where she and everybody else expected her to be. She even landed a sponsorship deal with Nike, the only Canadian wrestler, male or female, to do so. She’d put aside her disappointing performance at Worlds, and everyone considered her a near-unbeatable force for whom the national championships was a mere formality en route to a world championship.

But something was wrong. Even though Wiebe kept finding her name at the top of tournament results, her wrestling had grown defensive and tentative, a complete departure from the aggressive style she was known for. “I really do think I am one of the best wrestlers in the world,” she says. “I have the tools to create offensive pressure and do really good things on the mat. But I wasn’t doing them.” She couldn’t figure out why she was winning matches she felt she didn’t deserve to win. When Wiebe stepped on the mat at Nationals in March her self-confidence had collapsed. “I knew I was going to lose,” Wiebe says.

In hindsight, Ragusa says he saw the “red flags” at Nationals. He noticed that Wiebe was far more nervous about the competition than she had any reason to be. Still, Ragusa did not see anyone in Wiebe’s weight class as a legitimate threat. He’d been in Wiebe’s corner as she eked out tough victories against world and Olympic medallists, often coming from behind in points. “I had a tremendous amount of confidence in her.”

Wiebe lost. She faltered in a tight second-round match with Justina Di Stasio. Losing the match meant losing the entire year. The moment the referee raised Di Stasio’s hand, everything Wiebe had planned for the rest of the 2015 season evaporated. Wiebe lost her spot on Team Canada for the first time since 2012. She would not get to wrestle at the Pan Am Games in Toronto, or represent Canada at the World Championships. Wiebe stepped off the mat and walked out of the gym, her heart still pounding. “I hate getting emotional in front of other people,” she says.

As she fumed in private over her loss to Di Stasio, an unexpected sense of liberation washed over Wiebe. “I can lose,” she said to herself.



“I am not national champion. And I am still alive.” Instead of crushing her, the loss allowed Wiebe to shed the expectations she’d burdened herself with. “Losing Nationals really helped me to realign my vision of what I wanted to do.” This realignment did not occur overnight. A few months after Nationals, Wiebe lost to Di Stasio again at a tournament in Greece. “I was really, truly humble at that point,” she recalls.

Afterwards, Wiebe focused on why she loved to wrestle in the first place. “My favourite thing is when you get past the point of exhaustion. And you are just in this moment of instinct. When you free yourself from the concept of winning and losing. When you feel the purity of being in your body.” High-level athletes in all sports speak about reaching these moments of physical and mental grace when everything seems to flow without conscious effort. “But in wrestling, you are experiencing that with another person,” Wiebe says. “You are inhaling their oxygen. Their sweat and blood. Wrestling is a rare sport when your opponent is both your adversary and someone you are sharing an embodied experience with. It is so intimate.”

I know the corporal intimacy Wiebe speaks about. All wrestlers do. We know the gasp of an opponent once he quits fighting your gut wrench and surrenders to the turn. Or the moment near the end of a match when you read your rival’s fatigue by the pace of his breath and the limpness of his arms. Or the subtle but unmistakable shift of balance that allows you to twist an opponent off his feet, and the crumb of a second when your merged bodies are airborne before the crash. Or the opposite: when you’ve stepped forward at the wrong time and you know, with the certainty of physics, that your legs are about to sail over your head and all you can do is watch them pass.

People become wrestlers for different reasons, but the reason they

continue to wrestle is the same: they love those intimate collisions. Wiebe will never lose this feeling. I know this because I haven’t lost it. Twenty years off the mat and still I yearn for the grapple and grip. Wrestlers never stop being wrestlers.

Wiebe used her visceral love of the sport to fuel the rest of her 2015 season. She was tenacious and joyful on the mat. Instead of fearing losses, she battled for every turn and takedown. This return to first principles paid off. She won a tournament in Germany, beating the Estonian wrestler who upset her at the 2014 Worlds, then won gold at the Spanish Grand Prix. More important than winning, though, was that she felt she deserved to win.

Wiebe travelled to Las Vegas to watch Di Stasio and the rest of Team Canada compete at the 2015 World Championships. Di Stasio lost to a wrestler from Belarus in the preliminary rounds, and American Adeline Gray convincingly won the world championship. Wiebe had beaten Gray in the past, and knew she’d have done well had she made the team, but she wasn’t bitter. She never felt she belonged on those Vegas mats more than Di Stasio did. “I didn’t earn that spot,” she says. Still, her view from the bleachers convinced her that she could compete with anyone in the world at her weight.

Ragusa agrees. Much of the wrestling world is in awe of Adeline Gray. She is a three-time World Champion, the top-ranked heavyweight in the world—Wiebe is No. 2—and seen by many as the Olympic favourite. Ragusa, though, considers Wiebe a far superior wrestler. “In terms of ability, in terms of what Erica has in her toolbox, and in terms of Erica’s improvement over the years compared to Adeline’s improvement, I don’t even see them at the same level.”

Unlike most of her rivals, Wiebe doesn’t wrestle like the other

women her size. “She is too good of an athlete to wrestle like a heavyweight,” Ragusa says. Wiebe shoots efficient low singles, the sweeping leg attacks she performed on me over and over, like an athlete from the lower weight classes. “I don’t think any of the other girls can handle those shots.” Wiebe also has a quick shoulder throw and a laced ankle that, according to both Ragusa and the bruises on my shins, is “deadly.” But it is Wiebe’s pace on the mat that truly sets her apart from the rest of the field. She is dynamic, fit and fast. There isn’t a heavyweight in the world that can keep up with her once she starts to scramble.

**LAST DECEMBER, WIEBE TRAVELLED TO SHERWOOD PARK.** Alta, for the Canadian Olympic Team trials. “Going into the trials, I truly left no stone unturned in my preparations,” Wiebe says. She’d crushed her previous self-doubt beneath thousands of laced ankles and low singles, and hours of takedown drills, running stairwells and lifting weights. As she waited for her first match to start, Wiebe felt completely at peace. “I had done every single thing I could have. Mentally, physically and emotionally.” Everything paid off in the end. Wiebe dominated Di Stasio in the best-of-three final. The matches weren’t even close. Wiebe was going to Rio.

I could cloak Wiebe’s victory at the Olympic Trials in florid metaphors of redemption, but I doubt Wiebe would appreciate it. She has little patience for such clichéd drama. Besides, winning tournaments, even the Olympic Trials, is not what makes Wiebe happy. “I am most happy after a really hard wrestling practice,” she says. There are days Ragusa and Wiebe’s other coaches work the team so hard that she literally fights back tears through her exhaustion. “I hate this feeling, but I don’t stop. And this is the emotional space that I continue to seek.” Wiebe becomes her best self in those moments of absolute suffering. Then happiness comes to gild her agony. “That’s kind of messed up,” she admits.

Since December, Wiebe has had to adjust to life as an Olympian. “One thing they never tell you is how much qualifying for the Olympics changes your life,” Wiebe says. Nothing changed for Wiebe on the mat. She did not alter her training schedule or competition load. “I’ve been training for the Olympics for eight years,” she says. “Obviously, what I have been doing is working well.” But the way people react to her has utterly transformed. “I have some fabricated notion in my mind that people are looking at me like I am an Olympic wrestler now. And I have to try to fit within the ideal.” She feels she should behave differently somehow, but is unsure what that means. She doesn’t know what people expect from her. “I am still just a person,” she says. When I shook my head and told her that, as an Olympian, she was *more* than just a person, Wiebe told me to shut up.

Wiebe scoffs, too, at those who say she will have a great time in Rio. “There is a misconception that it is going to be fun,” she says. “But there is nothing about wrestling that is fun. It’s not like tickling my boyfriend or playing with a puppy.”

Wiebe will arrive in Rio burdened with high expectations. With her impressive CV of victories, and her No. 2 ranking in the world, she is considered one of Team Canada’s best chances for a medal. “There is a lot of pressure on Erica right now,” Ragusa says. Then he lowers his voice a bit, perhaps without realizing it, as if he is about to blaspheme.

“I don’t care about the Olympic Games,” he says. “I don’t care if she medals. I don’t care about all this talk about whether she could win, or should win. I don’t care about any of that s---” Instead, Ragusa wants Wiebe to compete the best she possibly can. “I want her to compete from every position like I know she can compete. Attack the way she can attack. Score the way she can score. That’s all I want from her. And if she goes in and does all that and ends up last, I will be proud of her.”

Wiebe says the same. Olympian or not, medallist or not, champion or not, she just wants to wrestle well. The playful brightness of Wiebe’s eyes when she competes testifies to her pure affection for the sport. “I don’t really hate losing,” she says. “And I don’t really love winning. But I love the grind.”

