

LA STORIA DI SAMMARTINO

May 17, 1963. Madison Square Garden, New York. World championship heavyweight wrestling match. The reigning champion, American Buddy Rogers, 38, vs. Italian challenger Bruno Sammartino, 27. There is no love lost between the men. At the bell, Sammartino rushes from his corner at breakneck speed, like a bull enraged by a red flag, overwhelming Rogers before he has a chance to set-up. Sammartino picks up the champion and body slams him to the canvas with unbelievable force, once, then again, with the force of the man who set the world record for the bench press at an unheard of 565 pounds four years earlier. Then he seizes Rogers in a "backbreaker" hold. He speaks to the champion as he takes him apart and makes him no longer a champion. "Give it up, Buddy, or I'm going to have to hurt your back real bad." Buddy gives it up. A submission match. It lasts 48 seconds. There is a new world champion. An Italian bull of a man, 265 pounds of concrete passing for muscle, packed onto a 6-foot frame. 1943.

Pizzoferrato, Italia. An 8-year old boy is awakened from sleep by the sounds of tanks thumping, jeeps motoring, rifles and machine guns firing, soldiers running. Orders barked in a strange, guttural language. Then he hears a familiar, beloved voice in his soft, native language. "Emilia, Emilia, I tedeschi arrivano!" "Emily, Emily, the Germans are coming!," spoken to the boy's mother in warning. The mother takes the boy and his two brothers and two sisters and they leave their town, Pizzoferrato. They escape to the mountains, to a wooded area of Abruzzo called Vallerocca. The family, with other Abruzzesi, would remain in Vallerocca till the end of the war in 1945. They endure brutal winters. There are no doctors. Many people, at the extremes of the life span, the very old, perish. The boy from Pizzoferrato himself becomes deathly ill with rheumatic fever. Had the war lasted a few more months, he too probably would have died in Vallerocca. When word reaches them that the war is over, they trudge the five miles or so back home, back to Pizzoferrato. The boy is so sick, so weak, that he is practically carried all the way home. Grazie a Dio, their house still stands, damaged but not destroyed, like their spirit. They try to resume a normal life, with the sounds of war echoing in their mind, gradually diminishing, more distant, only to rebound and grow louder and louder in a crescendo, like that night two years earlier. The boy's parents, Alfonso and Emilia, finally get in-touch with each other later in 1945. There had been no communication during the war because Alfonso had left Italy to make money in America in 1936, settling in Pittsburgh, working in a steel mill. Signor Sammartino asks Signora Sammartino if he should return to Italy or if the family should join him in America. She replies that they should go to him, for in Italy there is "nulla che miseria"---nothing but misery. In 1947, the family tries to rejoin the head of the household in America but the sick boy holds them back---he cannot pass the required physical examination. Because of immigration quotas, they must wait until 1950. This time he passes the physical and the family arrives in New York on March 11 of that year. Emilia Sammartino reunites with her husband and Paolo, Sandrino,

Anita, Maria and Bruno Sammartino see their father again after 14 years. The boy Bruno, at 14 years of age, weighs approximately 85 pounds. The ravages of rheumatic fever have left their mark. After the family settles in Pittsburgh, among the first Italians in the blue-collar Oakland section of the city, Bruno and his brothers are called names and bullied almost daily, coming home from school with black eyes and bloody noses, worrying their poor mother to distraction. A kindly acquaintance, a Jewish man named Maurice Simon, feels sorry for Bruno and takes him to the local YMHA. It is a fateful, historic happening: Simon introduces Sammartino to weight training and amateur wrestling. Bruno feels an immediate connection with the barbells and weights. He can feel something good will come of this. The teenager attacks the weights fanatically, hungering for the respect he knows will come from the size and strength they will bring. Inanimate though they are, they communicate with him like a long-sought teacher and guide. They speak to his heart. "Lift more. More. Get bigger. Stronger. Don't let anyone push you around anymore. Don't let anyone make your mother cry again." Bruno amazes people with the enormous progress his zealous devotion brings. Feeding himself with pasta, protein shakes and iron, he spurts to 140 pounds in a matter of months, entering high school at that weight. In high school he competes in weight lifting, wrestling and football. He graduates high school at 225 pounds. No one picks on him anymore. After graduation, lifting literally day and night, on the construction site by day and in the gym at night, competing in weight lifting contests in the mid to late 1950's, he begins to knock down lifting records, first local, then county, then state, then national records. 1959 is the year that makes Bruno Sammartino's name known. He wins the North American Weight-Lifting championship in Oklahoma City, setting the world record for the bench press at 565 pounds, at age 23. Success attracts attention and makes connections with two local legends of Pittsburgh sports franchises. Bob Prince, the radio voice of the baseball Pirates, invites Bruno to appear on his TV show. Art Rooney, the owner of the football Steelers, invites him to try-out at summer camp. A professional wrestling promoter sees him on the Prince show and takes him to the nation's capital to meet Vince McMahon Sr., the head of the Worldwide Wrestling Federation, who offers him a contract, promising him about \$30,000 his first year. Sammartino also talks with Rooney, who tells him a pro football lineman would start at \$7,500 a year. The NFL would never see Bruno Sammartino. So it began. The legendary wrestling career of Bruno Sammartino would stretch for nearly a quarter of a century, from 1959 to 1982. For approximately half of that career, for 12 of his 23 years as a pro, he would reign as world champion (1963-1971 and 1973-1977). He was also Canadian champion from 1961-1963, self-exiled in Canada because of his refusal to take falls in fixed matches during the beginning in the USA. He would headline Madison Square Garden 211 times, appear in North America, South America, Africa, Europe, Australia and Asia (20 tours of Japan). Sammartino was only pinned three times in 7,000+ matches. Once he broke his neck. Madison Square Garden again. 1976. The scene of his greatest triumph, 13 years earlier. This time he enters the match as champion, against Stan Hansen. But this time something goes wrong. Terribly wrong. Bruno

tries a shooting tackle, bouncing off the ropes to gain momentum to run into Hansen, while Hansen tries to body slam him and cannot. In the attempt, Bruno lands on his head. He goes numb. He cannot feel anything from the neck down. His massive, powerful body does not respond to his command to get up and continue fighting. This can't be happening. His mind races: up to heaven and God...down to earth, and Pittsburgh, his wife Caroline, his sons David, twins Danny and Darrell, parents and siblings... to Pizzoferrato-- "Mamma, che succede, che succede? Aiutami!" ("Mom, what is happening? Help me!") The crowd of his adoring fans falls into a chilling hush as their hero is carried away on a stretcher, immobile. But he does not remain immobile for long. Under the care of a great neurosurgeon, Dr. Edstrom, he is hospitalized a month and recovers in just eight months, returning to the ring as champion in 1977. Bruno Sammartino had come within a millimeter of being paralyzed from the neck down for life. Bruno lost the championship later that year but wrestled five more years before retiring in 1982. After devoting 23 years to professional goals and achieving the highest possible success in his field, becoming a champion, a hero and a legend, Bruno wanted to devote the rest of his life to his family, to make-up for lost time, and to get to know the country that he left 32 years earlier. He wanted to go back home. With his wife Caroline, his high school sweetheart, "a very amazing lady," (at this writing they have been married 45 years), he has returned to visit the land that birthed him once or twice every year since retirement. The first few years, this most famous son of Pizzoferrato concentrated on Pizzoferrato and Abruzzo. His childhood home still stands, but not the way it did when the SS troops stormed-in in 1943. Now the man who was the boy who fled to the mountains was moved, not with numbing fear, but with profound emotion, to see a slab of marble on his house reading, "Qui nasce Bruno Sammartino"---Bruno Sammartino was born here. There is also a sports facility built in his honor. The paesani didn't forget. After getting reacquainted with Abruzzo, Bruno and Caroline traveled all over the peninsula in the succeeding years, visiting the major cities and resorts. He had to leave his country as a poor boy to earn wealth and fame in a distant, rich land in order to go back to see and appreciate the incomparable riches of the country he left. If it wasn't for America, Bruno Sammartino would probably not know Italy. Sammartino maintains dual citizenship in the countries he loves. He is comfortable in the language of each. Each one is "extremely special" to him. His life is now in America but his heart will always be in Italy. In his own words: "I'll always feel Italian because, how do you forget the life I had over there? How do you forget the war, for one thing? How do you forget the wonderful people that I was around all the time in the small towns? I have such wonderful memories of my uncles and aunts, going to the fields with them and then at night being together with the family at the fireplace, eating...But I've said a thousand times, I am very, very grateful for the opportunity to come to this country, because this country opened its doors. It allowed me to do what I wanted to do, to be what I wanted to be. I am as grateful as one could possibly be, but at the same time, I get goosebumps every time I go back to Italy because I feel like I've come home." This world traveler's Italian soul never left

him. Impressed as he may be with aspects of other cultures, he has never seen Italy's equal. "We have so many unbelievably talented people. Dante, Da Vinci, Galileo, Michelangelo, Rossini. Music, architecture, art. Who could you compare them to? I can't think of anybody else in history to compare them to. Even when it comes to the average Joe, like stonemasons---they're all Italians. And the kitchen---the food, without question, is the best in the world. I've been everywhere and there's not a country that can touch Italy with a 50-foot pole for the food." No other art form expresses the heart and soul of people as does music. This is the art Bruno loves most, specifically vocal music, which springs as naturally from the Italian soul as instrumental music springs from the German soul. As naturally as water from a spring. Bruno is an opera fan. He was a friend of the recently departed Franco Corelli, one of the greatest tenors of the twentieth century, a man as legendary in his field as Bruno in his. Their skills intertwined once, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where Corelli was to sing the leading role in a revival of a French masterpiece, "Werther." Fans of another tenor thought their hero should have sung the role and someone threatened Corelli that if he performed, his legs would be broken. Sammartino saved the day by bodyguarding his friend on opening night, staying at his side in the dressing room and backstage during the performance, prepared to intercept and thwart any potential leg breaker by breaking a few legs himself, if necessary. As impressed as he is with his famous countrymen, he is more impressed with a not so famous countrywoman. She is his biggest hero. She was his mother, Emilia. She had "courage like no one" he's ever known, risking her life as a middle-aged woman during World War II. She was the impetus for his career. For his life. "I conducted myself and lived my life because of the love and respect I had for my mom. I tried my damndest to not make her ashamed of me and to make her proud she was my mom. She was the world to me." Their relationship was the stereotype of that of an Italian mother and son, but without the negative, deriding Hollywood cliches, with only the beauty of wonderful, unashamed love and devotion. When he was hopping the globe as a wrestler, he called her from wherever he was in the world, every day for 23 years. When he retired, he visited her at her home 3-4 hours every day for 14 years. When she was on her deathbed at age 97, he and his surviving brother and sister did not leave her alone for a minute. They took turns staying with her around the clock. Bruno's shift was from 9PM to 9AM. He slept by her bed. He talked with her in their dialect throughout the night, about their lives, about the war, things they never forgot, experiences only they could understand together, that could never be understood by or shared with any other human being. Only Bruno and his mom. Just those two. Mother and son. He still has to catch himself when he awakens some mornings, thinking, "I have to go see Mom," even though she has been gone now eight years. That was the kind of love they felt for each other. Today, at age 68, Bruno Sammartino can reflect on an extraordinary life, the kind of life that extremely few human beings have lived. Trimmed to around 215 pounds by health necessity, with two major back operations in the past two years, he still exercises six days a week, alternating between lifting and walking. His philosophy of life has not

changed. For a man who made his living in such a violent way, it is surprisingly benign. "Work hard, be the best you can be. Work hard for your family. Show them honest-to-goodness love. I live my life to be as kind and gentle as I can be and I'm not going to let anybody sway me." The secret to his success? Perhaps this: "The desire to achieve...the pride to be...the Italian in me."