

## First African-American wrestler for Oklahoma State: Joe James

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Joe James, first African-American wrestler for Oklahoma State

In the early 1960s, the eyes of the college wrestling world were on **Joe James** of **Oklahoma State**. Not just because he was the first African-American wrestler for the storied Cowboy wrestling program... but also because of his powerful physique, and tough, physical wrestling style.

One can imagine the reaction to Joe James 45-50 years ago being similar to that of WWE and UFC champ **Brock Lesnar** during his college career at the **University of Minnesota** a decade ago. At the time, **Dan Gable** said of Lesnar, “When he strips off his warm-ups, he turns more heads than Cindy Crawford in a thong.”

Thanks to **Dennis McCabe**, we don’t have to imagine the reaction to Joe James.

“I remember being at the 1960 Illinois high school state tournament when Joe James took to the mat,” says McCabe, 1963 Midlands champ who placed third at 165 pounds at that same state championship. “He had the Chicago city heavyweight title, and, even in high school, he was 6’ 3” and 220 pounds. As soon as he took off his jacket, the crowd went ‘ooh.’ They were blown away by his incredible physique. Most had never seen anything like it.”

Oklahoma State teammate – and future pro wrestling legend – **Jack Brisco** said of his workout partner, “Joe James has the widest shoulders and smallest waist I’ve seen on any athlete.”

Fans and opponents saw plenty of Joe James’ broad shoulders, massive chest and washboard stomach, since he and his Oklahoma State teammates of that era usually wrestled in trunks and tights, bare-chested. (This was before today’s one-piece singlets.)

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, black wrestlers were a fairly rare sight in high school and college competition. Look through team photos of the era, and you might see one solitary African-American on an otherwise all-white team. (For example, [Simon Roberts](#), the first black NCAA champ, was also the first – and only – starter of color during his career at the **University of Iowa** from 1954-1958.)

Oklahoma State was no exception. The Cowboys are the **New York Yankees** of college wrestling, with by far the most individual and team titles in the nearly 80-year history of NCAA wrestling... so they helped set the tone for all college wrestling programs. Fifty years ago, Oklahoma State’s young, innovative coach, **Myron Roderick**, welcomed wrestlers from Iran and Japan to compete for the Cowboys... and broke new ground by bringing the carved-from-granite, third-place heavyweight from the 1960 Illinois state tournament to the Stillwater school in 1961.

In his sophomore year -- his first as a varsity wrestler -- Joe James had a perfect 12-0 dual-meet record wrestling as heavyweight, including a 5-0 win over his only African-American opponent of the season, **George Thomas** of **Northwestern University**. At the **1962 Big Eight** (now Big 12) conference championships, James dropped down to 191 pounds... and lost to **Keith Johnstone** of **Iowa State**, 3-2, in the opening round... but pinned his way through the consolation bracket to place third. A couple weeks later at the **1962 NAAs** at Stillwater, the massively muscular Cowboy lost in the finals to cross-state rival **Wayne Baughman** of the **Oklahoma Sooners**, 2-1.

The rest of his career at Oklahoma State, Joe James wrestled heavyweight. In his junior year (1963), the Chicagoan made mat history when he got a 5-0 decision over cross-state rival **Eddie McQuarters** of the **University of Oklahoma** -- the first time two African-Americans had competed against each other in the long-running **Bedlam Series** between the two schools. (McQuarters had written some history of his own, being the first black state

champ in Oklahoma for **Tulsa Washington High** in 1961.)



Bob Billberg, Minnesota State-Moorhead heavyweight (Photo/Amateur Wrestling News)

At the **1963 Big Eight** conference championship heavyweight finals, more history was made when James defeated McQuarters in overtime, becoming the first black champ in the conference. Later that season, at the **1963 NCAAs**, James placed fourth... earning All-American honors for a second straight year. After the college season, James became the first U.S. wrestler of color to win a gold medal at the **1963 Pan-American Games**.

The 1963-64 season was Joe James' year; he was 19-0-1 in regular-season action (that one tie was vs future Olympian **Larry Kristoff** of **Southern Illinois University-Carbondale**). James won a second **Big Eight** title, defeating **Richard Redd** of the **University of Colorado**, 9-2, in the finals. At the **1964 NCAAs** at **Cornell University**, it was a battle of Chicagoland big men in the heavyweight finals: **Chicago's Tilden Tech** grad Joe James going up against the 1962 Illinois state champ from suburban **Waukegan High School**, **Bob Billberg** of **Minnesota State-**

**Moorhead**. James won the match 4-2, becoming only the second black college heavyweight champ in the nation (**Syracuse's Jim Nance** being the first, the year before). By becoming Oklahoma State's eighth NCAA heavyweight champ, Joe James became the first black titlist at any weight for the Cowboys.

Joe James completed his Oklahoma State career with a record as muscular as his physique: 51-3-2, for a .929 winning percentage. Fourteen of those wins were by pin. He won two Big Eight conference titles, was a three-time NCAA All-American, and 1964 NCAA heavyweight champ. Just as important, Joe James opened doors for other African-Americans to wrestle for the Yankees of college wrestling, the Oklahoma State Cowboys.

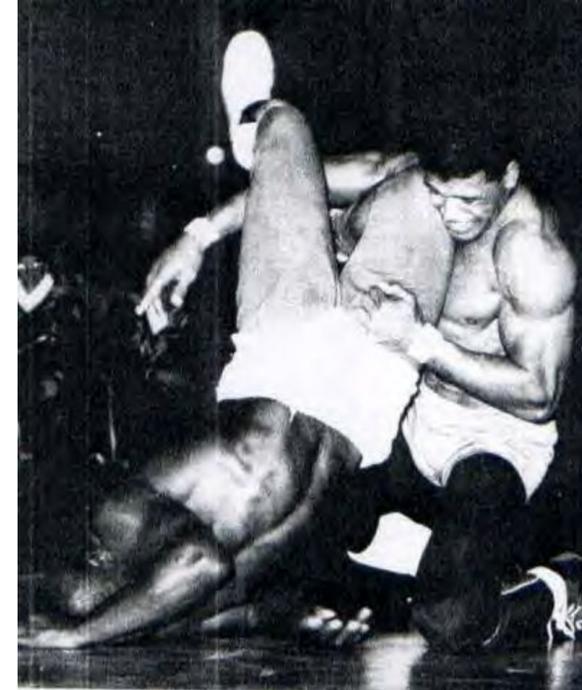
*Next: Bobby Douglas*

## Resources

Photos and info on [Joe James and opponents](#)

Joe James' college record at [Wrestling Stats website](#)

Author's InterMat article on [Oklahoma State's heavyweight legacy](#)



Joe James controls cross-state rival Eddie McQuarters of the Oklahoma Sooners at the February 1963 Bedlam Series (Photo/Amateur Wrestling News)

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