

Fighting back from an accident on a lonely stretch of highway

The backroads of Washington state twist and turn, tumble and rise, in random routes through mountain skies. They climb the slopes and churn through the clouds and come back down, stitching together the Northwest states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

It was on such a road that the University of Oregon wrestling team was riding in its van Jan. 21, a Saturday morning, when the road swerved away and the van didn't, continuing headlong off a snowy patch and tumbling down the mountain. It was one of three serious accidents involving sports teams in the Northwest that weekend. This one killed two wrestlers, hospitalized others and left the rest with the burden of trying to carry on the pursuit of excellence while keeping a sense of perspective between sorrow and competitiveness.

One of those left to carry on the season was Brad Steward, a freshman from West Anchorage High. Another Alaska wrestler at Oregon, Cass Wallis of Wasilla, was injured earlier in the season and redshirted, but Steward, a two-time national Greco-Roman champion, made the starting squad. He was on the team van when it made its charge down the slope.

"The night before we had wrestled in Pendleton against Montana," Steward said this week. "We killed them. It was really funny, 'cause the head coach there wrestled for Oregon a couple of years ago. It was



roger brigham in my time

something like 46-9.

"We were going through the mountains up to Pullman. It wasn't really icy... more snow than ice. We were right at the peak when the road turned and we slid off.

"I was asleep. The first thing I remember was hitting the roof inside the van. Then I got thrown out of it."

Steward was bruised and battered in the crash, but was otherwise all right. "I got up right away while the van was still rolling. I went to the first guy I saw and helped him up to the road. When I got up there, some of the guys who weren't so badly injured were up there by then. I went back and tried to help the other guys, but we couldn't move some of them."

In the shock of the moment, there was no sense of time. Steward has no idea how long

the team waited for help. Help eventually came to Highway 127 in the form of ambulances and helicopters, but it was not enough. Lorenzo West, a 142-pounder, died en route to the hospital. Jed Kesey, the 150-pounder, died a few days later. Others were hospitalized, some in critical condition. When the team resumed mandatory practices a week later, only two of the wrestlers who were on the bus continued to wrestle: Steward and 177-pound sophomore James Terry.

"The rest withdrew," Steward said, "and some are still in the hospital."

The full effect of the ordeal took a few days to catch up to Steward. Because he wrestled at a much higher weight (191 pounds) than either West or Kesey, and because he had only been on the team a few months, Steward had not been close to either grappler.

"That's why it didn't hit me at first. The other guy who's still wrestling knew them better and it was really hard for him. It wasn't real bad right then. Four or five days later, during the funerals, it really kind of set in. It's something that you just don't want to believe."

Steward took a two-week break from his studies and attended the memorial services. His folks flew down from Anchorage to visit. "We talked it over and that helped."

Steward threw himself back into competition with the same drive that twice made him

a state champion and twice a state runner-up in high school. He continued to win, but the team, which moved reserves into the open spots in the lineup, was never quite able to regroup.

"I don't think we really did," he said. "We didn't win one meet after that. I don't think everyone's emotionally over it."

Steward's drive has paid off. He's caught back up with his school work and last weekend he took third place in the Pac 10 wrestling championships; that was good enough to land him a wildcard berth in the NCAA nationals March 8-10 in New Jersey. He was the only Duck matman to qualify.

"I'm pretty excited about it. Of course, it's not much fun in the practice room right now with only two of us in there and the coach watching everything I do."

With so much to do, so much to live for, Steward must devote himself to his task at hand. He's got a good shot for an Olympic berth in 1988 and a strong showing in the NCAA would be an excellent start. To look to the future, Steward must accept the past and move on.

"I just try to forget about it," he said. "You put it in the back of your head and hope it stays there."

"But I know I'm never going to forget it."

□ Roger Brigham is The Daily News sports editor.