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Q and A with RIT/NTID grad 'The Hammer'

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Rush-Henrietta Post

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Utica, N.Y. — Matt Hamill's nickname — "The Hammer" — is fitting.

Five years ago, he was inducted into the NCAA Division III Wrestling Hall of Fame, and he's the first wrestler in the country to win medals in two types of wrestling — freestyle and Greco-Roman — in the World Games for the Deaf. That was 12 years ago, though.

More recently, he competed for the top spot on the third season of the Spike TV show "The Ultimate Fighter." And Hamill, a light heavyweight, recently improved his record in professional mixed martial arts to 8-2 with a knockout of Mark Munoz. He took home \$60,000 for "Knockout of the Night."

What's more, Hamill is the inspiration behind a movie that will be filmed in Rochester in the fall by Film Harvest, an independent film production company based in Hollywood. The project is three years in the making and has yet to be named.

Hamill, 32, graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf in 1999. He recently shared with the Post some of his experiences and reflected on the challenges he has faced as a deaf athlete.

Q: When and why did you decide to transfer (from Purdue University) to RIT?

A: I transferred to RIT in 1996. The reason why I went to RIT was for the deaf community. They have a great deaf program. Purdue is still part of my blood. The reason why I went to Purdue was that I had a full-ride scholarship and plus it was closer to my home in Ohio. My goal was to win a Division I national championship. Education comes first and that is why I transferred to RIT. I focused on education more than anything and got a degree in electrical engineering, but right now I'm not in the field of electronics. I'm just a fighter.

Q: How important was it to be involved in a strong deaf community at RIT for your success as a fighter now?

A: It's really changed my life. I learned a lot about deaf culture and hearing culture. It was a great challenge because RIT didn't have a great wrestling program. I was at open tournaments and all the Division I schools were looking at me saying "where is RIT?" Once I wrestled a kid from Minnesota and pinned him in less than 15 seconds. I just pinned him and went home and played PlayStation. I'm not trying to be cocky, but I've been wrestling for 26 years.

Q: What are the challenges you face being deaf in the ring and facing an opponent who can hear his cornerman, and not being able to communicate with your corner on the same level?

A: The important thing is communication. All three trainers and I sit down and talk about strategy before the fight. We discuss the game plan. We discuss my striking. We discuss my footwork and what my plans are before I get into the ring, but it's not very easy. All the fighters can use their coach in their corner, but I don't. I just go out to the ring and fight on my own. It's all about me. There's a good advantage: If there are 50,000 people screaming, you can't even hear them. It is similar to wrestling. From day one, as a boy I was really struggling not having an interpreter. I didn't give up. I just kept going and kept going.

Q: What is it like to have a movie in the works that is about your life?

A: It's about my early life when I was struggling and how I became successful. Being deaf, a lot of people don't really believe — they underestimate me. They have no idea what I am capable of. I'm just smiling. You will see it in the movie. It's a great story.

Q: Talk about your last fight.

A: Everyone thought Mark Munoz was going to beat me. I love to be the underdog. I love to confuse people. They got a wake-up call. Hamill is the real deal. They were stunned when I used the high kick. I just hope he is okay. After the match I was so excited. There were a lot of deaf fans; they were all from RIT. Deaf fans on the RIT campus are like family to me. The more deaf fans, the more motivation I get.