

Olympic champion wrestler pays a visit to E.C.

Canada's top grappler spends day with OFSAA champs

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

The Champion

E.C. Drury rarely takes a back seat when it comes to wrestling.

But during a special morning presentation Tuesday, Larry Jaroslowski's OFSAA champs gladly surrendered the spotlight to this country's most accomplished grappler.

Daniel Igali — Canada's first ever world champion and Olympic gold medalist — spoke to the entire student body to kick off a day-long visit to the local school.

The Nigerian native began his half-hour address by poking fun at his lack of height and telling audience members that his accent may require a little closer attention on their part.

"Actually, I've been told that my accent is quite sexy," he quipped to lighten up the crowd.

While most probably expected a detailed account of his rise to the top of international wrestling, the highly decorated athlete focused more on other aspects of his life — including his first experience in Canada.

Coming overseas for the 1994 Commonwealth Games, Igali was overwhelmed by this country's generous nature. One particular incident he remembers with great fondness is being courteously waved across a busy street by motorists.

"I don't know another country in the world where they'd do that," he said.

Eager to escape the political unrest of his native Nigeria, a then 20-year-old Igali quickly inquired about the possibility of staying with a new acquaintance. And when that simple request was met with a favourable response, he quickly contacted his family

and told them he had found a new home.

While the move was certainly risky — since he had no friends in Canada and just \$50 in his pocket — the soft-spoken world champ said sometimes "you have to take chances."

Since then he has not only scaled the global wrestling mountain but earned a university degree as well. And while success hasn't always been forthcoming, he's proud to say that the effort has been.

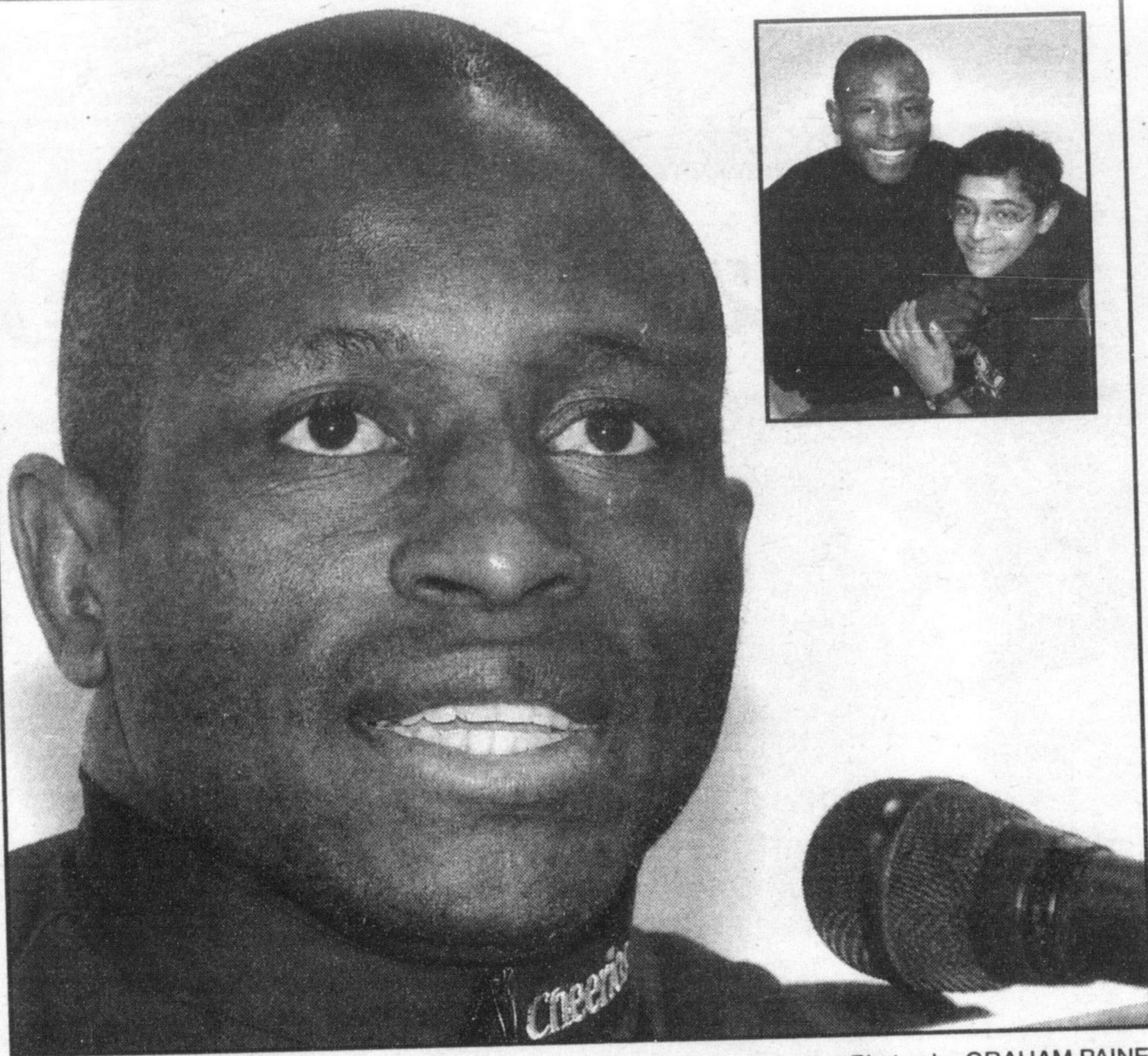
"How you get there is what's most important," stressed Igali. "You're going to have disappointments. You're not always going to get what you bargained for. But you just have to keep working and do it better the next time."

That philosophy served him in good stead through the early stages of his Olympic journey — especially at the '94 Commonwealth Games when he placed a modest and potentially ego-deflating 11th.

But Igali persevered — calling on Olympians like Carl Lewis for inspiration — and in 1999 became a world champion. The following year he added Olympic gold.

Igali also read a rather touching letter from his grandmother during his presentation — which followed a brief film documenting his vast wrestling feats — and spoke of the need for determination for whatever goal one sets out to achieve.

Also addressed was his ongoing efforts to build a new school in Nigeria — a project which will be aided by E.C. Drury. He ended the morning session by helping Jaroslowski officially honour this year's OFSAA winning Spartans. Unveiled were banners of the past three provincial triumphs and one signifying the school's recent three-peat.



Photos by GRAHAM PAINE

Canadian Olympic gold medalist Daniel Igali spoke about the importance of determination and hard work during a visit to E.C. Drury High School Monday. Later he met with members of the school's wrestling team including (inset) ninth grader Prashant Naikwadi.

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