

# Calendar

## Sudden Death with Sweaty Palms

### Regional Arm-Wrestling Tournament

**'A**rm wrestling, a lot of it, is hand control," says John Brzenk of Sandy, Utah, who is considered by many to be the best arm wrestler in the history of the sport. "The larger the hand, the more leverage advantage the arm wrestler has and the more difficult it is for an opponent with a smaller hand, even if it's stronger. Most of your really good arm wrestlers have a fairly good-sized hand."

It's logical that Brzenk (pronounced *bra-zinc*) got his hand size from his father, a former arm-wrestling champion from Chicago. "Yeah, there

are some genetics going on there. Good genetics are required," says Brzenk, who, as

a teenager, tagged along to bars and taverns with his dad and began to compete with men three times his age. In the years since then, he has won against men three times his weight, which is currently 205.

How has it happened that he has not only dominated the middleweights but also has been very successful competing against many of the heavyweights in the world?

"Weight is important," says Brzenk, speaking by phone from the Salt Lake City airport where he works as an airline mechanic. "There are weight classes, because someone who is heavier does have an advantage over a smaller guy. But I have been able to compete with virtually anybody. You can relate it to boxing. Most of the good arm wrestlers are around that 200-pound weight; once you get over that, I think it's extra baggage."

That's because arm wrestlers have to be quick? Correct, says Brzenk. If arm wrestlers were runners, they'd be



Reno Reunion International Pro-Am arm-wrestling tournament

sprinters. They have developed the "fast-twitch" muscle group.

It makes sense that quickness counts, considering the length of a typical match. The referees allow the competitors one minute to "get a grip" and set themselves up in a comfortable position before the "go." If it takes longer, the referees separate the opponents and set them up with what they call a referee's grip. After that, there is no time limit. The competition goes "to the death," says Brzenk, but death is usually sudden. "Most of the time it takes just a couple of seconds."

Isn't that demoralizing for the loser? "Well, arm wrestlers understand that whoever is best out of the box is going to win the match."

It does happen sometimes, though, that people will be so well-matched, they'll get "locked up." Brzenk says he has seen a match last ten minutes.

That's a long time to be cozied up to one's opponent. What about sweaty palms? Slippery hands can be a problem; they can cause the arm wrestlers to lose their grip. If that happens, the referees tie the opponents' wrists and hands together with a strap. "Once that strap is applied, it's virtually impossible to get away," says Brzenk.

And what of heavy breathing, bad

breath, grunts, and grimaces? "I don't worry about those things too much. I try to stay calm. Some people get all worked up and get the psyche thing going and do the screaming. Whatever works best."

Does an arm wrestler look at his or her opponent? "Some do. Most are concentrating on getting a good grip, so they're normally looking at their own hand and the other person's grip to get as much of an advantage as they can, from the start."

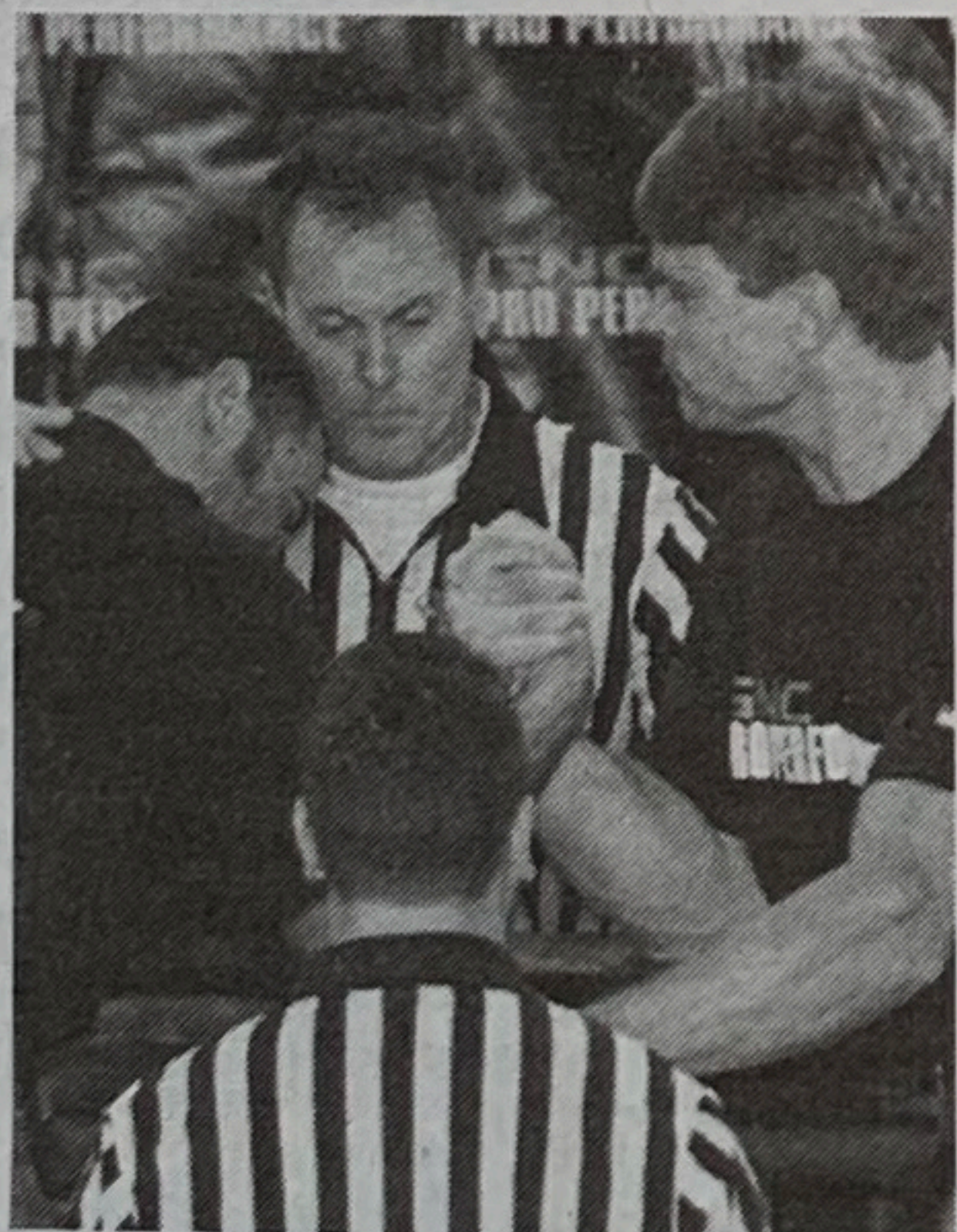
This weekend Brzenk plans to be in San Diego for the qualifier of an upcoming national event. There will be five weight divisions for men and an open-weight class for women. (There is no left-handed division.) He expects all the top West Coast competitors to be there. "Anybody from west of the Mississippi who wants to participate in the championship in New York in September is going to try to make this one," says Brzenk, who is the defending champion.

Why exactly does Brzenk have such a formidable reputation? Is it because of the number of people he has beaten? Or the length of time he has gone unbeaten? "Probably a little of both. I have been in the sport now for over 20 years. I've been around forever. If you want to get an idea of how long, think of *Over the Top*,

the Sylvester Stallone movie that came out in 1986. Stallone was a truck driver who travels cross-country with his boy to arm wrestle in Las Vegas in this big world event to win a tractor trailer. Well, there really was tournament in Las Vegas in 1986 for a tractor trailer, and I was the real winner of it."

One final question: Do arm wrestlers shake hands before, like boxers? Or afterwards, like tennis players? "Normally before." He hesitates. "And sometimes after."

— Jeanne Schinto



John Brzenk

**The General Nutrition Centers' Pro Performance Regional Arm Wrestling Tournament**  
**27th Annual Pacific Beach Block Party**  
**Garnet Street**  
**Bayard and Mission Blvd.**  
**Saturday, May 11,**  
**11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.**  
**Cost for competitors:**  
**\$20 proof of purchase or**  
**UPC code of a GNC**  
**Pro Performance product**  
**or cash donation to**  
**Special Olympics**  
**Observers: free**  
**Info: 800-229-4758 or**  
**www.gncproperformance.com**

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