

## Are we a Wrestling Town?

I have often marveled at how certain states in the country, or areas within the state of New Jersey, are known far and wide for their favorite sport. In Texas and Florida, the religion of choice is football. Massachusetts and Minnesota have their hockey. And Pennsylvania and Iowa are famous for their obsession with wrestling.

Within the state of New Jersey, the Hamilton/Cherry Hill area always seems to produce great baseball teams and players. Bergen County is rightfully proud of its high school football. And Hudson County is a basketball hotbed. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon throughout our state, and varying opinions often stir heated debate. Of late, the shore area seems to have replaced West Jersey as the state's richest wrestling area, although with the proliferation of New Jersey's private wrestling clubs, pockets of success in the world's oldest sport have developed seemingly everywhere.

Is the Watchung Hills area one of those pockets? I submit to you that, indeed, it is! At the high school level, we have who is thought to be one of the top five coaches in the state. Coach Dan Smith oversees a Warriors wrestling program that has produced a NJ State Champ in four of the last six years. In 2004, it was the multi-sport athlete Mike Gatti (U Penn baseball), who struck gold over Paulsboro's favored Trevor Suter. In 2006, Alex Caruso (Lehigh wrestling) won it all after finishing third in 2005. And last year, Brendan Ard (Wisconsin wrestling) repeated as NJ State Champ, after winning the crown as a junior. Coach Smith has also sent several state place winners to such schools as Bucknell and VMI.

Success at the high school level, especially in this warrior sport, obviously starts at the youth level, and ours is no exception. All of the above-mentioned athletes came through our youth program, currently run by Mike Mupo and Mike Magaldo, with help from, Mike Seckler, Dan Allgor Rob Saum, Marc Haywood and Zoltan Gombas. In addition to those stars who achieved state-wide wrestling acclaim at WHRHS, there have been other tremendously accomplished wrestlers who have wrestled in our youth program, but continued their winning ways at different high schools: Kody Hamrah twice finished 2<sup>nd</sup> at Bishop Ahr High School, and Andrew Flanagan (Bound Brook) was a two-time state champ who wrestled collegiately at Harvard. The truth is, over the last 5-6 years, the Watchung Hills area has emerged as a state wrestling power at the youth level, producing a disproportionate number of elite level wrestlers. An examination of the NJ "Kids States" results offers proof. In 2004, Tommy Ross and Evan Dill each took 6<sup>th</sup> in New Jersey's brutally competitive individual state championship tournament. In 2005, it was Matt Nobbs and Danny Reed who each placed 6<sup>th</sup>. In 2006, Mike Magaldo finished 2<sup>nd</sup>, losing only to a multiple time national champ in the finals. That same year, Alex Murray took 5<sup>th</sup>, with Andrew Gombas and Ty Agaisse each placing 8<sup>th</sup>. In 2007, Watchung Hills wrestlers were ubiquitous at the season's culminating event: Michael Divito, Alec Pollera, and Agaisse finished the day as state champs, Dominick Urso took 3<sup>rd</sup>, Alex Fornelos 4<sup>th</sup>, and Kyle Murray 8<sup>th</sup>. In 2008, Watchung put six on the podium, led by Magaldo who again took 2<sup>nd</sup>. Alex Murray and Keith Kuzmenko finished 3<sup>rd</sup> that year, with Ty's brother Wade Agaisse taking 5<sup>th</sup> as a first year wrestler, and Anthony Dirosa and Alex Pollera taking 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> respectively. This past year, it was Ty Agaisse and Alex Pollera again taking gold, Magaldo taking silver, and Reed and Michael Salerno earning bronze. Dirosa again medaled, this time taking 6<sup>th</sup>.

While the above accomplishments go a long way toward painting a picture of Watchung's wrestling dominance on a state-wide level, several current Watchung wrestlers have waded into the even deeper talent pools inhabited by some of the country's best.

Mike Magaldo competes annually in the most competitive, elite-level dual meet competitions in the nation, representing his town and home state with pride. In 2007, at the NHSCA Duals, Mike wrestled to an incomprehensible 7-0 record, earning himself a NHSCA Gold Medal and achieved All-American status by the National High School Coaches Association. Mike has also placed twice at the Ohio Tournament of Champions, annually one of the nation's most competitive individual tournaments. Mike is also a 3x NJ State runner up finishing behind a wrestler who is considered one of the best in the country. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from if you're Mike's weight, you're at risk!

Danny Reed took his skills to the Jersey Shore this year, where he competed at one of the season's toughest individual events: the War at the South Jersey Shore. This annual event attracts state champs from across the Mid Atlantic region. Fresh off his 3<sup>rd</sup> place finish in the NJ state tournament, Dan shocked the youth wrestling community by placing 2<sup>nd</sup>. Beating a two-time Delaware state champ along the way, Dan lost a tight finals match (6-4), 4x NJ state champ. Later that same month, Danny won the acclaimed Cliff Keen Eastern Worlds in West Virginia, beating the Florida and Maryland state champs in doing so.

Two-time NJ State Champ Ty Agaisse, owns an equally impressive national resume. Ty is also a 2x Ohio TOC place winner (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>), a 2x War at the SJ Shore place winner, a bronze medalist at the 2009 Cliff Keen Eastern Worlds, and a 4<sup>th</sup> place finisher in the venerable Mid-Atlantic Wrestling Association's Eastern Nationals (MAWA's). Ty's reputation for wrestling above his age and weight at high-level events reaches beyond NJ's borders.

Several other local wrestlers, including Alex Pollera (2x NJ State Champ), Andrew Gombas, and Alex Murray, also routinely compete at national caliber events. When they do, observers usually have the same reaction, "Man, those Jersey kids are always tough!"

The bottom line is this: we live in a wrestling town. The name "Watchung Hills" carries respect and credibility with wrestling folks from High Point to Absegami... from Phillipsburg to Brick. The youth program is highly organized and well-run. We compete in the state's biggest and toughest league, and do so at an extremely high level. Our coach, Jay Aldrich of the venerable Aldrich family of local wrestling renown, does a great job molding our boys both on and off the mat. He teaches life lessons of discipline and respect for one's self and others. This is a program our towns should be proud of. It's one of the state's best, and it's time the community knew and appreciated that. If you are looking for a sports program to build character, discipline, confidence and toughness in your son, look no further. One of the state's best is right here in your backyard.

Registrations are now open for the 2009-2010 season. Applications and additional information can be found at [www.whwa.org](http://www.whwa.org).