

# A doer, a teacher, a friend

## Wrestlers and others remember Coach Don Knisely

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By DORIS WOLF

GENEVA — John Bagshaw was telling listeners the other day about the man behind the Panther Invitational Wrestling Tournament.

"One night Don Knisely asked me if we could do a tournament," recalled Bagshaw. "I'm a dreamer, but Don was a doer. He'd know what I could do and he'd make me do it. When I'd get nervous and bogged down, he'd recognize it and be right there to help."

The tournament — with Knisely's help and direction — became a

success. But Knisely, a social studies teacher and varsity wrestling coach, drowned last summer, and athletes, coaches and fans took time during the seventh annual tournament Saturday to remember and honor their friend.

Knisely's portrait, with its characteristic long drooping moustache, was propped in front of a battalion of golden trophies, beside the bronze statue, renamed the Donald L. Knisely Award, to be given the most outstanding wrestler in the tournament.

Tears flowed freely as high school student council president Mike Acquilano and wrestling team

captain Kyle Salone dedicated the small gymnasium at Geneva High School to Knisely.

The dedication was postponed until Knisely's son Shawn, 14, could finish his championship match. It was his first Panther Invitational as a competitor. Holding up his championship trophy and winner's T-shirt, Shawn accepted the ovation from the overflow crowd. Later, he fled to a back room to drown out his thoughts by listening to music on his radio.

"He was more than a teacher, he was a friend," Acquilano said of Knisely. "After he finished the

day's lesson in our 10th-grade social studies class, he'd sit on the desk and swap stories about fishing, his college days, wrestling — just shooting the breeze."

Acquilano said Knisely taught the students "how to win on the wrestling mat and how to win in life."

Salone, wearing a black arm-band with white initials DLK pinned to his warm-up suit, paused often to choke back the tears as he spoke of his coach and friend.

"He was respected by all the students because he was always there to discuss an academic or personal problem. He always worked with you to help you improve. I miss him. We all miss him," Salone said.

Knisely, Salone said, didn't just work with kids during school. Just as wrestling is a 24-hour-a-day sport, so Knisely was an around-the-clock coach.

"When I was in 10th grade, I caught mono because I cut weight wrong. He helped me with my diet so that wouldn't happen again," Salone said.

He recalled the special times he and some teammates joined Knisely on his fishing boat. While trolling in Seneca Lake, they'd sing.

"He had a nice voice, and he knew some dirty ditties," Salone said, laughing. "We also liked to sing a song Joe Beniamino, a former wrestler, wrote for the Fun

Bunch, a group of wrestlers who liked to fool around a lot. Coach would really get annoyed with them sometimes."

"He'd holler at kids he expected more of," explained Bagshaw, manager of the Panther Invitational and one of Knisely's close friends. "He didn't like it when kids didn't practice, when they didn't work to capacity. He was strict on important things. He bounced kids off the team who didn't measure up."

Rob Quigley recalled Knisely as a strict coach with "a mean clipboard."

"He'd slam it down whenever one of his kids did something wrong. When you heard that sound, you knew you'd made a mistake. He'd yell at you sometimes, but he didn't explode. He'd let you think about it. He tried to get you to learn by figuring it out yourself."

Knisely worked to bring out the best in each individual, even if that wasn't enough to earn the top prize, Quigley said.

"As long as you did your best, he was happy," Quigley said. "You didn't have to win, you had to put out the best you could."

Just as Knisely was totally dedicated to the students and to the wrestling tournament, so he expected and inspired that dedication from everyone associated with the Panther Invitational.

"People here care about each

other and take care of each other," said former wrestler Phillip Lanning.

"And that feeling is passed on to the wrestlers. We knew the other competitors and after a meet, there were no sore losers. We still went on being friends," he said.

John Alessi, coach of the Webster High School wrestling team, said Knisely's spirit is felt by everyone who competes at the tournament.

"Don and I screamed at each other during the tournament; the competition was intense but we were always close friends," he said.

"If you give respect and love, you receive it back. Don was special. He gave a lot of love. His number one priority was always the kids."



Donald L. Knisely

