

SPORTS

The Forstner File



By Scott Forstner

There I was, speeding down Route 25A to Huntington High School for the Blue Devils' annual pre-season wrestling tournament. It's after 9 a.m. and I'm late. As I pull up into the high school parking lot, the place is packed out. I grab my note pad, recorder and pen and head into the gymnasium, only to find the teams sitting around on the mats and the tournament not yet underway.

I thought it was a lucky break at the time - the upstate teams had arrived late and

delayed the start - but it was an omen of the longest day of work outside the office I've endured this year. I finally left Huntington High School a little past 9 p.m. That's 12 hours later.

Oh, I forgot to mention that chief editor David Ambro, my boss, stayed for the whole tournament despite getting there about a half-hour after myself - and I even had to drag him out before all the medals were given out, or else I was going to collapse from exhaustion.

Not that I'm complaining, because the Huntington Classic is one of the most competitive wrestling competitions of the pre-season. This year, I had three schools within my coverage areas - Huntington for the **Huntington News**, Northport for **The Observer** and Commack for **The Smithtown News** as well as the **Commack News**. So getting three teams in one shot is a bonus in this business. Other Long Island programs participating were East Islip, Massapequa and Glen Cove as well as upstate squads Canandaigua, Rondout Valley and Clarkston South.

The atmosphere was intense inside the gym from the opening round (which did not get underway until 10 a.m.) to the finals (which were supposed to start at 6 p.m. but did not get going until two hours later). The wrestling families and enthusiasts, in addition to the coaches and grapplers themselves, make for an emotionally charged event. Looking up into the bleachers, grapplers from each team were in tight knit groups, and some mingled with others that they knew from league or club teams or the state meet.

Some of the morning matches that satisfied my itch for some good wrestling included Northport's Jaret Czarniecki and Joe Moramarco getting their first wins of the year following All-County campaigns last season. And Steven Palacios, of Huntington, stepped onto the mat at 125 pounds and went right back to work like it was the very next day after he won the New York State Championship.

After writing up previews on the teams the previous week, it was interesting to see how first-year head coach Bill DeSario and his youthful Commack Cougars would handle the challenge. While the defending county champion Huntington Blue Devils, under coaching legend Lou Gian, were as intimidating as ever in their white jumpers and hoods in their home gym, the Northport Tigers were seeing their first action of the new season and head coach Al Cicio wanted to answer some line-up questions.

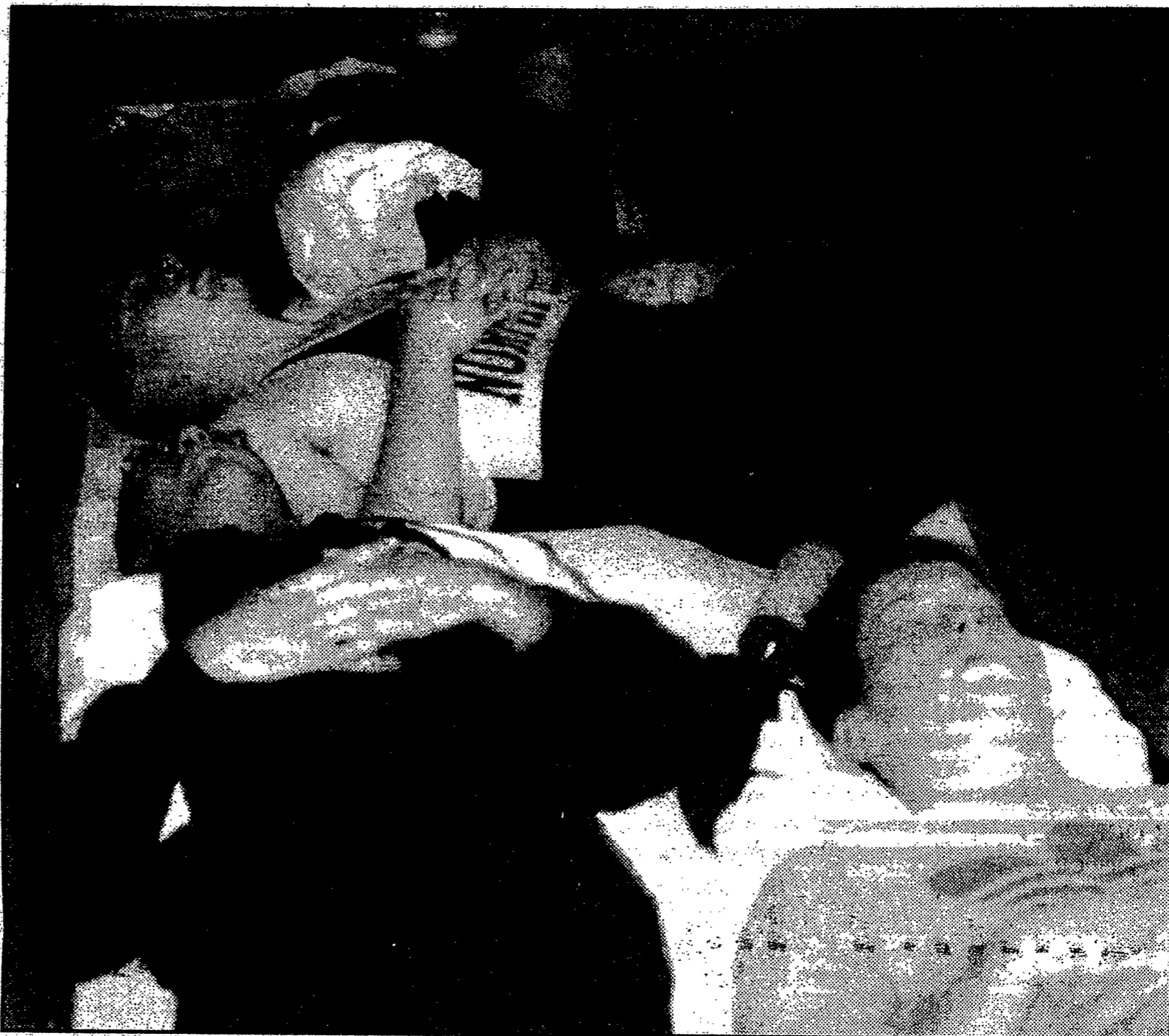
Even the upstate teams had a presence to them. The Canandaigua squad, which ended up winning the tournament ahead of second-place Huntington, wore red jump suits with the school name in white writing. Canandaigua and the other two upstate teams, Rondout Valley and Clarkston South, traveled as much as eight hours to Huntington and were lodged at local hotels.

In between matches, it was not uncommon to see wrestlers sprawled out on the floor sleeping, waiting for their next bout. So it was a long day for everyone involved - from the parents to the coaches to the wrestlers to the high school staff on duty.... to the local media.

But for this reporter specifically, it was even more hectic as I shot over to Smithtown High School after Moramarco won his 112-pound semifinal match with a 6-3 victory. The time was about 3:30 p.m.

I arrived at Smithtown High School a little after

Winter Season = Long Work Days



Members of the Northport wrestling team take a power nap during the Huntington wrestling tournament.

four o'clock, and the Smithtown Tournament title game between the Bulls and Northport boys' basketball team was already into the second quarter with Smithtown clinging to a 16-15 lead. As the Bulls expanded their five-point halftime lead to as many as 14 points by the start of the fourth quarter - and the time nearing 5:30 p.m. - I deliberated on whether to leave early and head back to Huntington for the wrestling finals or stick around to see if Northport would make it interesting.

Anyone attending the game knows I made the right decision to stay until the end, as the Tigers nearly pulled off a Reggie Miller-like comeback. After Northport junior guard Matt Zepernick drained a three-pointer and junior point guard Adam Cimigliaro sank two technical foul shots, the gap was cut to 56-51 with 19 ticks remaining. Then, Tigers' junior forward Mike Filippone made it a three-point contest by hitting two more free-throws.

At which point I was thinking: "Wow, is this thing heading into overtime? If so, there's no way I'll get back in time for the wrestling finals."

I could rest assured, because I knew Ambro was on the case, anyway.

With 11 seconds left, Bulls' senior guard Dan Wenzel made both ends of a one-and-one to put Smithtown up by five, but a Brian Sisti putback brought it to 58-55. But time had run out on the Tigers, as Smithtown held the ball until the buzzer sounded.

Instead of waiting around to interview the coaches and players - whom I had a million questions for - that buzzer sent me running out of Smithtown High School and on my way back to Huntington. When I returned just on time at 6 p.m. for the finals, the wrestlebacks for third, fourth, fifth and sixth place were still going on.

Then, the four mats that had been set up all day

were reduced to just two. Those two mats were sanitized. Then, each wrestler in the finals was announced to the crowd, which was just as rowdy and as large as when I arrived in the morning.

While I was happy I did not miss a bout because there were great match-ups throughout, it was also eight o'clock at night. Once the finals got underway, it was like I just got there. It did not matter that I had not been home since forever. As Ambro scored the 96-pound final between Huntington's Dan Kapner and East Islip's Rohan Murphy, I was watching the 103-pound contest between Huntington Joseph Flumano and Gary Gelinias of Canandaigua.

We each took a mat with Ambro switching for some Huntington guys he wanted to cover and myself more interested in Moramarco and two Commack grapplers in 160-pounder Chuck Cavaliere and 171-pounder Ray Chopay.

But the match of the night was the 125-pound finals, as Palacios took on Trevor Chinn from Canandaigua. After falling behind 2-1 in the first period, Palacios rallied for a 4-3 edge at the end of the second. Palacios went up 5-3 with an escape only to have Chinn get the takedown to tie the score at five. Another Palacios escape earned him a one-point lead and the match was his with a late takedown.

It was a great match, but so were most of them. After the 275-pound final was decided, my night was not yet over. First, we had to see which team won the tournament. This took some time. Then, the medals for first through sixth place had to be handed out.

We did not wait for all the medals, but it was already after 9 p.m. All we could talk about was the matches we saw as I'm sure every spectator and competitor did. It was just another day in the life of a North Shore News Group sports reporter. And I wouldn't trade that for a lot of things.

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# 140-Pounder Fights Back For Third-Place Finish

(Continued from page 29)  
worked out."

Things did not work out as planned for Rogin in his 140-pound semifinal match against Tom Cuppernel, of Canandaigua. After Rogin fought for an escape to tie the bout at nine with under 40 seconds to go in the third period, Cuppernel caught Rogin for the decisive takedown in overtime.

"He just took a bad shot, but he came back and wrestled hard in the wrestlebacks," said Cicio of Rogin.

While Roer, the top seed at 171 pounds, rebounded from an opening-round upset to wrestle back for fifth, Vinny Rizzo retaliated from getting pinned in the 189-pound semifinals to take third place with two straight wins.

"[Roer] wrestled a real tough kid [in the first round]. It will take awhile for him to get used to wrestling at the lower weight," Cicio said. "Vinny could have won the tournament. He made a

desperation move and got caught in the semis. This was the first tournament of the year, so there's a lot of rust to get off."

Despite being sick for the entire week of practice, Ramonetti hung tough at 125 pounds - finishing with a 2-2 record. "He wanted to wrestle so we let him go," Cicio said. "He didn't have a full week of practice, and that hurt him. But in this tournament, just to place is good because it is such a tough tournament."

Northport heads into the two-day North Babylon Invitational (December 15-16) before the showdown against East Islip. Then, the Tigers will compete in the Ward Melville Tournament (December 28) and follow up with their home league-opener at 7 p.m. against Walt Whitman (January 5).

"We'll use this as a gauge to see where we are. We definitely need to get better on our feet," Cicio said.



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