



The match of their lives

L.I. wrestlers battled burns

By TOM FITZGERALD
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Mike and Scott Thomas would like to forget the first day of school 1976. that was the day a flash fire nearly cost them their lives. they have been battling the memory on the wrestling mat ever since.

The two brothers came from a pair of wrestling institutions on Long Island. One was their family — dad was a former coach and older brother Jeff was a two-time state champion who's now at Michigan State. the other was Huntington High, a perennial power in Suffolk County.

Mike had finished fifth in the state as a sophomore 147-pounder. As a junior he wanted No. 1. "I know I would have won it," he said.

Instead, he spent 2½ months in a hospital with burns over 75 percent of his body. He had to relearn how to walk. the wrestling season was lost.

Part of the season was salvaged for Scott, although he had severe burns on his legs.

Their comeback trail led to Spencerport yesterday. Huntington was one of 18 teams competing in the Lions-Bernabi Memorial Tournament, possibly the best tournament in the state except for the actual state championships in March.



D&C photo by Brad Bliss

Dave Truman of Caledonia-Mumford can't escape this hold. He was pinned in 29 seconds by Trevor Graham of Spencerport.



Huntington, L.I. brothers Scot, left, and Mike Thomas are wrestling again after they were nearly killed in a fire.

THOMASES

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In early September of last year, the Thomas boys were working for their father and their coach, Lou Giani, reconditioning wrestling mats. They were using flammable fluid to prepare a mat for painting when the accident occurred.

"To this day we don't know what caused the fire," Giani said. "The building was open on three sides like a pavilion but the fumes were trapped in the corner. It was a flash fire. It lasted about 10 seconds. The building wasn't even touched.

Giani and their father yanked Scott to safety. Mike was more seriously hurt.

"I didn't know where I was," Mike said. "I wandered around a little bit before they pulled me out. I think a spark from a compressor started it."

Even though their hospital room was frequently packed with teammates, recuperation was a painful ordeal, especially for Mike.

"They had to lift me into a tub to scrub off the dead skin," he said. "I was flat on my back for a month. I had third-degree burns on my arms and legs and second-degree on my chest, back and face.

"I had to have nine meals a day. To build new skin, I needed protein. So I had to have 6,000 calories a day."

Nevertheless, he lost 20 pounds in the hospital. "It set me back strength-wise a lot. I had to learn how to walk all over again, first one step, then two. They gave me a walker but I couldn't hold it with my hands."

Giani said Mike "is coming in leaps and bounds. He's scholarship material." And Scott, a sophomore, has plenty of high school matches ahead.

Yesterday Scott scored a second-period pin over Joe Balis of Syracuse Bishop Ludden before losing a tough 4-3 decision to Monroe County 112-pound champion Chuck Tortorello of Fairport.

Mike, wearing gloves to protect his hands and tape for his legs, moved into the semifinals with early pins over John Lamb of Lancaster and Greg Olsen of Madison, N.J.

NOTEBOOK: Eight Hilton wrestlers reached the semifinals beginning today at 11 a.m., and the Cadets held a slim lead over Athens (pa.) after the quarterfinals, 129 points to 127½. ... Spencerport's Ron Winnie (126) and Fairport's Ken Jamison (132) have two pins each so far.