

★ Colleges court Ithaca's Iacovelli

By DAVE EDICK

IITHACA—Mark Iacovelli can't throw a football 80 yards and can't pump in 10-of-10 25-footers on the basketball court.

But that doesn't mean the major colleges aren't interested. On the contrary, the 126-pound Ithaca High senior may just be one of the most highly-regarded athletes in the country. Not for his prowess on the field or court, but for his skill on the wrestling mat.

It began early this year. Some of the major universities — including Oklahoma, Penn State and Missouri — made some of the initial contacts and the inquiries haven't stopped. Iacovelli's coach, Orlando Turco, says he was getting at least one call every night. The rate has slowed somewhat now, according to Turco, but the recruiting offers are close to 50.

"Every major wrestling school in the country has been in touch," Turco said. "And I mean all of them. Mark is the most outstanding all-around wrestler I've ever coached. His record is fantastic."

Looking at the numbers, it's not hard to see just why Iacovelli is so highly thought-of.

In addition to being a three-time regional champion, he has been a three-time crown-winner in both Class AA schools and Section 4 and a two-time state champ. He has also topped the rest of the competition in his weight class in the National Junior Olympics and was a runnerup in the National Junior Federation Tournament. Heading into his senior campaign, he has an incredible 66-match winning streak going and carries a spectacular three-year record of 98-1-1. He was 30-0 two years ago and 36-0 last year.

With his 98 victories, Iacovelli is closing in on the all-time New York State record of 121 total wins, set by Jeff Thomas of Huntington High on Long Island last year. Thomas, incidentally, was also responsible for Iacovelli's sole loss, that coming in his freshman year.

"He'll break that record easily this year," said Turco. "His biggest problem will be getting to opponents. Last year, there was quite a bit of running away from him and stalling just so he couldn't get the pin. I have an idea opponents will be doing the same thing this year."

"But if he doesn't win by pins, he wins by big decisions. The biggest thing with Mark is his dedication to the sport. That, together with his flexibility and balance on the mat makes him the tremendous wrestler he is. He moves like a cat."

Turco is concerned about the pressures facing Iacovelli this year. Turco and Mark's father, Lawrence (himself a former accomplished wrestler), are fielding most of the college contacts to remove some of that pressure.

"His father and I are certainly not going to tell him what his actual choice of a school should be," says Turco. "We're just trying to separate the schools we'd think Mark will be interested in from the ones that he probably wouldn't. So right now, we're taking all the calls."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to run his life or anything. It just saves him a lot of problems if the college coaches and representatives come to see me first. We don't want a lot of unnecessary pressure put on him. He doesn't need that."

"Hey, that's part of my job. If I can make things easier for him, I'll do it. I just don't want to see him upset. I'm not trying to play God. I am trying to protect him. He's an amateur and right now he's trying to wrestle. He doesn't need the hassle."

Iacovelli says he has complete confidence in his father and coach handling the calls, preferring to concentrate on his wrestling. He has already visited the Missouri campus.

"I'll have to make a decision sometime, of course, but right now I really don't have any idea," he said. "The big schools, like Oklahoma and Pittsburgh, won't necessarily sway me,



Mark Iacovelli...a wanted man

though. Mainly, I want to go to a good school and be on a decent team. It doesn't have to be one of the best in the nation.

"The bigger schools, too, create an awful lot of intensity on their teams and I'm not really looking for that. I mean, there's some places where you have to involve yourself completely in wrestling and that's it. I want to compete and improve but not so that it takes away from the school end of it."

Iacovelli's interests are in a business major and a national championship on the mat. Turco went one step further, saying Iacovelli is an excellent candidate for a future Olympic medal. Iacovelli's uncle, Orlando, was the coach of the Canadian team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

"As far as college goes, I think there's three things Mark is looking for—a super education, a high level of competition and an environment he'll feel comfortable in."

"The big influence will be what kind of education he can get, though. He's told me when he finishes school, he wants to have something — not just wrestling memories."

For his last year as a member of the Little Red mat team Iacovelli is starting in the 126-pound weight group, but plans to drop down to 119 later. He said he has been spending quite a bit of practice time bettering his ability to go both ways (taking an opponent from either the left or right side). His already-enormous success extends a tradition of wrestling prowess in the family that's produced 12 sectional champs. Two younger brothers, Jeff, a junior, and Larry, a freshman, are on the Ithaca wrestling team to extend that tradition.

Now Mark is looking forward to one more successful year with the Little Red while his coach and father handle the recruiters. And Turco will tell them, as he tells anyone: "I've coached several state champions before, seven in fact, along with 46 sectional champs, but Mark is probably the finest wrestler I've ever had. And certainly one of the finest I've ever seen."

And the calls keep coming