

Wrestling With Challenge

Niagara Falls Woman Referees a Very Male Sport

By ANTHONY VIOLANTI

She has been bumped, kicked and jostled, but the one thing Donna Pike never expected was a punch in the nose. However, that is exactly what Miss Pike, the only female amateur wrestling official in Western New York, received during a recent match.

"One wrestler hit me right in the nose," Miss Pike, 25, of Niagara Falls, said. "He had just pinned his opponent, and he was so happy, he started jumping up and down and waving his arms in the air, hitting me accidentally on the nose."

"He felt terrible about it, and apologized. Then he helped me up off the mat."

Before she started, Miss Pike knew officiating wrestling matches would be difficult. She had been a high school wrestling fan since her childhood. Two of her brothers, Dominick and Douglas, were standout wrestlers at Niagara Wheatfield High School.

Miss Pike went to all their matches, and one day caught the attention of Armand Cacciatore, the Niagara Wheatfield wrestling coach. She became a scorekeeper for the team and eventually began traveling to all the matches.

She kept her interest in the sport after she graduated from Niagara Wheatfield in 1978, and last summer, while attending the Empire State Games in Buffalo, Miss Pike saw a woman official at a wrestling competition and decided that was what she wanted to do.

"I just felt I had to try it," she said. "I never wrestled, but I knew everything that was going on with the sport."

Becoming a female official in a sport dominated by men offered another challenge. There are 44 members of the Niagara Frontier Wrestling Officials Association, and Miss Pike is the only woman. She currently is a grade "B" official, which means she works at matches involving eighth and ninth graders, as well as junior varsity competition.

Before she was certified as an official, Miss Pike had to attend instruction classes for two months, pass a 100-question written test, and also be observed during a match by other officials. She was able to meet those demands and officiated at her first match Dec. 18, 1985.

"When I walked into the gym and saw all those people, I was really nervous," she said. "It still happens to me. As soon as I walk in, bingo, all eyes are on me because I'm a woman. But I'm used to that now; once the match begins, I forget all about the crowd and everything else."



Donna Pike officiates at a wrestling tournament at Kenmore East High School. She has been interested in wrestling ever since she was in high school and two of her brothers were on the wrestling team.

ROBERT E. STODDARD/Bufallo News

"I'm concentrating on the match. My job is to keep things under control and make sure it is fair for everyone. That's the most important thing."

One person who has been impressed by Miss Pike at this early stage of her officiating career is Cacciatore. "Donna is a very conscientious person, the type who would be good at whatever she tries," he said. "I really think she will be accepted because of her performance as an official."

Perhaps Miss Pike's greatest asset as an official is her quickness, Cacciatore said. "That's the thing I like about her officiating, she's

quick to get right down on the mat in a pin situation."

Quickness may be important, but so is judgment.

"In any sport an official must make judgment calls," Cacciatore said. "Those are always the toughest. Sometimes you agree with the official, sometimes you don't, but they have to make the call."

Cacciatore believes Miss Pike will win respect from the coaches and wrestlers, but fans may be harder to please. "She's going to have to prove herself," he said. "The more she does that with her performance, the more she will be accepted by the fans."

During competition, Miss Pike wears the same style uniform as other officials: black slacks and a black and white striped shirt. On the mat, she becomes an authority figure, in charge of the proceedings, and that's the way she is treated.

"The wrestlers and the coaches have accepted me," she said. "I know the rules and I know how to keep things under control, and that's what they want."

It may be an old refrain but Miss Pike believes a person should be judged by ability, regardless of sex. "I wasn't going to let the fact that I'm a woman hold me back," she said. "I'm not the kind of person

who can just sit back and watch, I have to be involved. This was something I wanted to do, and I did it."

Officiating at wrestling matches adds to her hectic schedule. Miss Pike works full-time as a night auditor at a Niagara Falls hotel. She enjoys sports and played softball and soccer in high school.

She has proved a woman can be a wrestling official, but the job still can be rough at times. That's one reason her father, Douglas Pike Sr., attends the matches that she works.

"Wrestling fans can get very emotional," Miss Pike said. "There have been times when officials have

had to have a police escort to their cars after a match. My father worries about me, but I haven't had any problems like that yet."

Actually, there has only been one recurring problem Miss Pike faces: finding a place to change into her official's outfit when she arrives at a school.

Usually the coach will meet the officials and take them to the boys' locker room. That may be all right for the other 43 area officials but not Miss Pike. "The coach has to find a different place for me to change," she said. "I've changed in faculty rooms, girls' lavatories, and other places. I've changed everywhere."