

Joe Downey, '99



Throughout Norwich's successful wrestling history, certain family names recur over generations. Some prominent ones are the Franklins, Manleys, Ryans, and Downeys. In the 1990's, "Downey" appeared so often in the Norwich lineups, a Binghamton sportswriter noted Norwich had more Downeys than the company had dryer sheets. Scott Ryan, memorable for his mat achievements, states that in wrestling "... there is a family dynamic like no other sport ... [that] exists because of tradition set forth by many wrestlers before

us."

This year's youngest inductee, Joe Downey, followed in the footsteps of his older brothers. Matt and Drew, their father Jim, and grandfather Ed. Jim and Joe's mother, Sue, undoubtedly experienced frequent living room and backyard matches involving the three brothers. Joe gave early promise of his potential in kindergarten as revealed in a photo of him wearing a singlet, taking a confident stance, and holding up his finger to indicate "number one." When Joe was asked why he started wrestling, his terse reply was "survival!" He added that it was "... awesome to wake up at 5:00 a.m. to go to a tournament." After a half dozen years of youth wrestling and becoming an Eastern National Champion in sixth grade, he was ready for more rigorous competition. Those friendly, brotherly brawls intensified his eagerness, and through the process of selective classification for top athletes, Joe was moved up to the high school level.

As a middleweight, rare for a seventh grader, Joe wrestled JV. Word spread quickly that he was only a JV wrestler because of a strong, deep Norwich squad. He won some varsity matches, including a 9-1 win over a proven Chenango Forks opponent on a night Matt and Drew won also. At season's end, he handily won the 145-pound JV STAC championship.

By fall of '94, Joe was up a weight and into the varsity lineup. By season's end he weighed 167 pounds and finished second in the STAC Championship to Justin Bowers of JC by 3-1. After his strong performance in the class tournament and upsetting a Deposit Decker in the semis at sectionals, this upstart eighth-grader brought the packed Broome County Arena to a frenzy by taking the senior Bowers into overtime before losing on criteria. Bowers became the state runner-up. Joe, meanwhile, had his sights on the States for himself.

During spring and summer, Joe joined other Norwich wrestlers encouraged to attend clubs, clinics, and camp sessions. He connected with Chuck Myers who would become his conditioning coach, great friend, and fishing buddy. He was highly diligent about conditioning and weight; he cites weight management and giving up other sports as sacrifices he made in his commitment.

He started in '95 up another weight and in early December gave notice of his development, though losing to state contender Dan Stine from Queensbury in the Clyde Cole finals. Section opponents that season succumbed to tech falls or pins as Joe developed a repertoire of takedowns and ability to escape from any opponent. He believed no one could hold him down. Though Norwich was moved up to Class A, the top seed at 177 pounds went to Joe. After gaining that crown, he won the sectionals against a senior from Horseheads securing a crucial takedown and escape, thereby qualifying him for the States.

In his first match at States as a freshman, Joe lost to a senior from Section 3 powerhouse Cicero-North Syracuse by 8-3. Joe proceeded to win his next three matches. Less than 24 hours later, in the consolation final, against the same senior, Joe narrowly missed the win after a controversial call on a well-executed throw at mat edge at final buzzer-this against the same opponent who had defeated him decisively the night before. Regarding tough losses, few of which he suffered, Joe remarked that wrestlers "... should never look back, get back on the horse, always work to improve." Scott Ryan, a stellar workout partner for Joe, summarized aptly: "His level of competitiveness was probably his most unique characteristic. He never showed fear, intimidation or vulnerability."

For 1996-'97, the weight classes were changed; Joe started early to get to a comfort level at 171 pounds. Despite his hard work to make weight without fail, he frequently received forfeits. Joe, given a pair of Coach K's black plastic reading glasses with white tape, was asked to wear them, slump on the bench, and "look weak." That strategy didn't work.

At the STAC championship final, he defeated his opponent with a dazzling display of different takedowns by a score of 20-7. He easily won classes the next week and at Section IV finals beating a "cautious" Windsor wrestler by a deceptive 6-3 score.

In his second trip to states, Joe cruised to the semis, losing there on criteria in overtime when a coin toss determined choice of position. The Section 6 wrestler, fortuitously named Josh States, escaped to win after choosing bottom. After winning the consolation final to take third, Joe remarked that it was "... extremely important, to move up, to improve from last year." States lost in the finals to Dan Perry of New Hartford, and Joe raised his goal for next year.

That summer, Joe was chosen for the New York State Freestyle Team (which finished second in the country) and then while wrestling at Fargo, N.D., he tore his ACL in his knee and underwent reconstructive surgery. Joe remarked in retrospect: "Dealing with rehab from injuries that unfortunately occur was perhaps the hardest aspect of it all," while also giving full credit to family support throughout to enable him to achieve what he did.

His determined, intensive rehab led him to ask repeatedly to get back in the lineup. Many professional athletes with the same injury require at least one year to rehab, and Joe was asking to return to competition after six to seven months, which the coaches declined. In late December, without fanfare and with a large brace, Joe returned to the mat against Chenango Valley achieving a quick pin to help the team win. After that, he regained form quickly with pins and tech falls leading to the STAC Championship where he decisioned Aaron Axtell of Ithaca, 12-6, and in the ensuing weeks won classes and sectionals over undefeated Joe Mack of Waverly who dropped down into Joe's weight. Mack's father commented after classes that it was a mistake to drop into Joe's weight class.

At the State Tournament, Joe, called the "bionic man" by announcers, won his early matches decisively to face the defending champion, Dan Perry. In a tight match of moves and counters by each wrestler, Perry prevailed by 3-1 despite a couple takedown attempts by Joe that nearly succeeded. His ultimate goal was still before him.

Fall of '98 found Joe a senior and at 189 pounds and occasionally at 215 pounds to get matches and help the team. Successful in both slots, most of his matches were six-pointers for the team. He was voted the Most Outstanding Wrestler at several tournaments such as Clyde Cole and Ilion. There were fewer forfeits; coaches knew that Joe needed matches to stay sharp to win the State title. After garnering STAC, Class B, and his fourth Section Four title, he was the favorite to capture the State crown which he well deserved. Two days before the States, another knee injury abruptly ended his high school career. Joe sent his section four uniform along with a "you can win it all" note to his replacement from Ithaca, Axtell.

Joe won four consecutive overall Section Four titles when only one wrestler per weight went to States, which was also one division. After his defeat in overtime in the sectional finals as an eighth grader, he never lost another match to ANY Section IV wrestler. He was named an Academic All-American and a Freestyle All-American. He placed fourth, third, and second at the States before the opportunity eluded him his senior year. Throughout his career he was a paragon of discipline, work, determination and sportsmanship.

Joe's exciting, aggressive style made him a crowd favorite. Bill Kitchen, longtime coach at Owego, remembers him as ". . . always tough and hard-nosed on the mat, but afterwards a true gentleman . . . he was never heard of saying or showed that his opponents weren't as good as he."

After graduation, Joe attended the University of Buffalo on a full wrestling scholarship qualifying for the NCAA's as a freshman and being elected sophomore captain of the team before injuries, this time, ended his wrestling career. Graduating with a bachelor's and master's degree in education, he initially taught at U-E and then returned to teach and coach at Norwich.

His winning ways showed quickly as the new head wrestling coach when Tristan Rifanburg became the first seventh grader in New York to win State Championship, Norwich's first in wrestling. "Joe is a model for kids and has restored a level of excitement in Norwich around the sport," Ryan said.

Joe now lives in Norwich with his wife, Amanda, who is the girls' head swim coach at Norwich High School, and their son, Kaden.

Joe's advice to young athletes is brief: "Commit fully, do what you have to do, make good decisions." He admits wrestling is changing, but his words stand the test of time in sports and life itself.

A highly respected coach and official, Carl Koenig, concludes his summary of Joe's many positive attributes which are echoed by many others: "In my 40 years as a wrestling official, I have encountered many great wrestlers and coaches, but Joe Downey ranks as one of the best. Norwich is indeed fortunate to have him as a member of its Athletics Hall of Fame."

—Don Kovalchik