

## 1990-91 Varsity Wrestling Team



Front Row: Toby Franklin, Scott Ryan, Neil Peraza, Matt Downey, Bill Crandall, Joe Telesky. Second Row: Joel Cummings, Craig Downey, Steve Doing, Sam Rifanburg, Joe Winton, Aaron Whaley, Alvin Moran, Matt Menard. Third Row: Kevin Slater, Randy Dunkel, Bob Clipston, Chris Jenkins, Steve Brean, Jim Shoales, Erik Evans, Matt Seroka, Jeremy Dahl, Nate Funk, Doug Murray. Fourth Row: Harold Humphrey, T.J. Conant, Dave Jennings, Dan Jenkins, Keith Evans, Mike Blenis, Tom Stoddard, Larry Slater. Missing: Henry Edwards, Dave Marino, Drew Downey.

Seven decades of Norwich wrestling featured several outstanding teams. Even in this individual sport, a group of wrestlers can “jell” into a cohesive team that achieves beyond its collective abilities. The '90-'91 team achieved beyond its collective abilities. The '90-'91 team distinguished itself remarkably.

Led by senior captains, Neil Peraza, Sam Rifanburg and Joe Telesky, the squad had a large number of underclassmen, most of whom had been coached by Rich Alger, Dave Funk, and Sam Whaley at junior and modified levels. There were 44 on the roster, and the lineup could be fluid. Wrestlers might challenge for a weight class, coaches might move a wrestler up (even during the meet), and illness or injuries could cause changes. In the pre-season booklet, criteria for a varsity letter included team points accumulated, placing in Sectionals, exceptional contribution, or extenuating circumstances such as severe injury. Twenty individuals qualified. Development and improvement were enhanced by full JV meets and tournaments such as our own Evening Sun Novice Tourney.

The coaches arranged a rigorous schedule and promoted a Wrestle-the-Best motto. The team won 13 meets, losing only to Johnson City, ranked 3rd in NYS. Soon after, UE beat JC 32-28; a few days later, Norwich trounced UE 45-12! All three teams ranked in the top 25 of NYS, JC 6th, Norwich 17th at the season end. At that time well over 400 wrestling teams in NY were all in one division with

schools of 8000 students (Brentwood) and tiny locals such as Gilbertsville and New Berlin.

Traditional powers fell to Norwich that season, including Chenango Forks, Maine-Endwell, Ithaca, UE, and nearby rivals, Sherburne Earlville and Oxford. In the Ithaca meet Kevin Slater was pulled out of the JV lineup, inserted into the Varsity to score a crucial win enabling us to move others up in the upper weights to win the meet over powerhouse Ithaca.

In tournaments, often with premier teams from other sections of NYS and other states, even Canada (Elmira Tourney), scoring differs from dual meets to reflect team depth and balance. Team scores include points for advancing, placing, and bonus points for major and superior decisions, pins, tech falls, as well as forfeits or defaults.



Front: Neil Peraza Standing: Sam Rifanburg, Joe Telesky

In early December the storied Clyde Cole Tournament was a tough test featuring Section Two's Queensbury, which had won the prior six years. Norwich convincingly won with 200 points over runner-up Queensbury's 168 ½. Norwich had six finalists and several other place finishers. Matt Downey and Joe Telesky were champions, while Toby Franklin, Bob Clipston, Sam Rifanburg and Dan Jenkins were runners-up. The big win was a hint of the team's potential. Joe Winton, Keith Evans and Mike Blenis all won consolation finals to add important points to the team score.

In mid-December Norwich went to Elmira with a subpar line-up resulting from flu and injuries. NYS's reigning top team, Fulton, dominated with Norwich finishing 4th out of 15 teams including several from other sections, PA, and 2 teams from Canada. Two more regular place finishers would have put us in 2nd place, but several regular consolation finalists did not wrestle through all the rounds. Dan Jennings won his weight class, Dan Jenkins was second and Buster Crandall, Neil Peraza, Joe Telesky, Steve Doing, Bob Clipston, Keith Evans and Toby Franklin all placed. Note several different names from the Clyde Cole entry.

Another historic test of team depth in late December was the Windsor Tournament; the field included teams from Sections Two, Three, Five, and Eleven (Long Island's Huntington). The host school won with 184 to 155 ½ for runner-up Norwich. Windsor had more champions, with the Purple having more place finishers. That would be reversed later in the season. Runners-up Matt Downey, Joe Telesky and Dan Jenkins lost close decisions in the finals. Sam Rifanburg, Tom Stoddard and Dan Jennings were consolation winners. Drew Downey and Kevin Slater added 4th's, with Slater upsetting the top seed at his weight. There would be a chance to reverse the outcome versus Windsor soon, as the younger wrestlers rapidly developed and the veterans became more determined.

Near season end, the highlight of Section Four wrestling was the STAC Championship, hosted by Norwich for the first and possibly last time, as the conference soon expanded dramatically. Norwich delighted a largely local crowd and stunned fans and folks from all around the STAC and Section by scoring 211 points to JC's 203. Tom Rowe's headline read, "Norwich's Depth Leads to STAC Crown."

The Purple had one champion, Joe Telesky, that over a JC foe—a swing of 8 points. JC had 6 finalists and 5 champs, but ALL the Norwich wrestlers placed, with Dan Jenkins and Dan Jennings vital runners-up. It was a total team effort. Four of the JC champs would go on later to

be semifinalists at the highly regarded NY States; their team was then ranked in the top 25 for the country. Every Norwich wrestler scored crucial points for advancing, placing, and bonus wins: Buster Crandall, Matt Downey, Aaron Whaley, Bob Clipston, Neil Peraza, Steve Doing, Joe Winton, Kevin Slater, Sam Rifanburg, Keith Evans, and Tom Stoddard were in the consolations. Each added at least 6-14 points to the total, a remarkable feat.

The very next Saturday, again with a packed gym, Norwich hosted the Section 4 Class B Tournament. Arguably the strongest of the 4 classes (A,B,C, D) for several years, Class B would be most difficult for a wrestler to qualify for the Sectionals, with Section 4 powers Windsor, Forks, Waverly and B-G-A in the field, as well as other schools having good wrestlers at some weights.

Windsor had defeated Norwich in their Christmas Invitational, but the outcome was reversed dramatically "at our house" with 198 points for host Norwich over Windsor's 148 ½. Tom Rowe's headline again summed it well: "Total Team Effort Gives Norwich 'B' Title". As they trod out of the gym, the Windsor Coach said to Coach K, "You beat the ..... out of us. Why aren't you ranked higher?" As we left later, Coach Whaley chortled, "They can have the paper, we'll take the gold" Coach Alger added his favorite "No excuses."

Norwich had won two major tourneys in 8 days, through the amazing feat of placing all 14 entries in their weight classes against top notch competition. The Purple had 8 finalists, with Matt Downey, Neil Peraza, and Joe Telesky champions, and Drew Downey, Sam Rifanburg, Dan Jenkins, Tom Stoddard and Dan Jennings all runners-up. Buster Crandall, Aaron Whaley, Steve Doing, Joe Winton, Kevin Slater, and Keith Evans were consolation finalists, adding many points to the impressive total score. Evans was the last to wrestle in the placing round (consolation semis), so the coaches rounded up his teammates who stood at mat side cheering Keith to the win. All 14 Norwich wrestlers had advanced to the Sectional Championships!

At the Championship Finals Norwich was a strong third to JC and Chenango Forks. There were 9 Purple place winners in the 14 weights. It was clear this experience and incentive would help the younger wrestlers. Many of those would go on in subsequent seasons to place higher and win titles. Norwich was on the map of New York wrestling, highly recruited by college coaches, largely because of one division representing over 400 schools.

As seniors in 1993, Keith Evans, Tom Stoddard and Dan Jennings were labeled "Norwich's Three Bears" in the official program at States. In their success they scored more points than any other individual school in New York State.

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Later in the decade Joe Telesky was a national runner-up wrestling as an underclassman for Div. III Brockport; in 1999 freshman Joe Downey at the University of Buffalo became an NCAA Div. I qualifier for nationals.

The successes of Norwich Wrestling in the 80's and 90's have been reinforced most recently with the Section 4 Class B and Div. II titles captured this past season, and coaches Terry Hagenbuch, Mark Mussarallo, and Bob Hagenbuch were elated by two Div. II State Champions in Albany, Frank Garcia and Tristan Rifanburg. Many of the names in this article are familiar to local wrestling fans, as these wrestlers are frequently sons of former Purple matmen. The coaches are predominantly products of Norwich wrestling. The junior program, coached by Tim Scheer, another Norwich standout, has been noticeably strong. It appears that Purple Pin Power is here to stay!

—*Don Kovalchik*



Matt Downey putting up a great fight during a wrestling tournament.