

Coach Don Kovalchik, 1971-2001



Throughout the college basketball world Duke University's long-time men's coach, Mike Krzyzewski, is affectionately known as "Coach K." But, eleven years before Krzyzewski arrived on the Blue Devil scene back in 1980; Norwich High School was boasting its own "Coach K."

Hired as an English teacher to begin the 1969-70 school year,

Don Kovalchik got his first taste of Purple Pin Power when he assisted then head coach Dave Funk, on and off again, for two seasons. And, when Funk stepped down following the 1970-71 campaign, Kovalchik took over the reins and held the Tornado course steady for the next 30 years.

"When I was first hired for the Norwich job nothing was said about wrestling, and I had no interest because we had just moved here and bought an old farmhouse," indicated Kovalchik. "That first year I helped Dave out a little bit, but did nothing to start the next year. But, then I got restless during the winter and Dave broke his elbow, so I started working out again with the wrestlers."

Thus began his historic run as not only Norwich's winningest and longest standing wrestling coach in the program's 81-year history, but one of its most beloved. When Kovalchik assumed his duties as the new coach of the Tornado grunt and groaners, he was only the fourth mat mentor to do so since the end of World War II. In a program begun by Frank Giltner in 1935, Kovalchik followed in the footsteps of Sam Elia (1946-65), Joe Clarke (1965-69) and the aforementioned Funk (1969-71). And, when he finally called it quits in 2001, he had led Norwich to the pinnacle of the wrestling world with a gaudy 271-124-5 (.686) dual meet record, and a place in the sixth induction class of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

"For three decades our opponents knew they would have a tough match with us, and during those years in the '70s, '80s and '90s we had some teams and many individuals highly respected and ranked in Section IV and New York State," emphasized Kovalchik. "We strove for consistency and did not think about rebuilding. Our coaching staff worked to instill a blend of technique and toughness that made for a reputation that some called 'swagger' in our wrestlers. I rejected that term in favor of confidence. Our t-shirts were noticed, especially the ones with purple bleeding imprinted on the motto 'Wimps Need Not Apply'."

"We had a stable staff, mostly homegrown over decades, but brought in newcomers to add new insights," added

Kovalchik. "Several assistants served many years, notably Rich Alger, Jim Wysor and (Dave) Funk. The staff, as well as parents and even wrestlers, often made suggestions which were later implemented."

Besides that impressive dual meet record, Kovalchik's squads were crowned Class B champions and STAC Division II winners six times each, with the 1990-91 team, which was inducted into the NHSSHOF in 2014, laying claim to the overall STAC title. Twice chosen Section IV Coach of the Year – 1990-91 (Class A&B) and 1992-93 (Class B) – his Norwich wrestlers were New York State place winners on 10 occasions, with 15 Section IV and Section III combined titles, 37 Class crowns, 29 individual STAC firsts and another 89 runners-up for the Tornado matmen.

Former NHS wrestler, Norwich Sports Hall of Famer and present day NHS Athletic Director Joe Downey, who graduated in 1999 after being part of six Kovalchik teams,



STAC Champions 1990-91

said that his former coach accomplished so much because of his leadership skills, his ability to care about others as individuals and his talent to get the best out of his athletes.

"There are a lot of good coaches in the world, but what separates the good coaches from the best is leadership. 'Coach K' was able to give his teams direction and motivation to help them reach their goals," explained Downey. "He made us write down our goals in the beginning of the year, and then had us re-evaluate these goals as the season went on. If we achieved our goals, he would have us make new ones to push us and make sure that we were doing our best and always striving higher."

Current Norwich head coach Bobby Hagenbuch, a 1989 grad and two-year Kovalchik wrestler after transferring from Cortland High School concurs. "He always looked out for his athletes. He would have coaches from colleges come to watch us at tournaments, trying to get us a scholarship.

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'Coach K' would always try to get us the recognition we deserved. He taught me to not just work hard at the end of the season but to work hard the entire season. He also taught me to do the things the right way, not only in practice but in school and life, too."

Another former grappler Scott Ryan, a 1995 graduate with six years mat experience and present day Norwich Middle School Principal opined, "What set 'Coach K' apart from the rest was his interest in helping kids become men. He viewed each wrestler as a personal investment. Wrestling is a sport that you either love or hate. He understood the need to balance the demands of the sport with life, and wrestling was the vehicle that allowed him to instill life lessons in every victory or defeat."

And, in the early years, it was not all wine and roses as Kovalchik and his Tornado pretzel makers sported losing records in three of his first four seasons. After posting an inaugural mark of 9-2 during that initial 1971-72 campaign, Norwich suffered through three consecutive losing years with an overall mark of 17-24-1.

Over the next 26 seasons, though, the Purple would sport only two other losing efforts, with the high water mark coming during a seven-year run commencing in 1988. During that time frame, Norwich rang up an impressive 73-16-2 (.802) dual meet record, laid claim to four Class B crowns and won its only overall STAC championship with the 1990-91 lineup (13-1).

"There have been many memorable times over the years," reflected Kovalchik. "Winning meets and championships make it all worthwhile, but the most rewarding thing of my career has been the relationships with the parents, fans and, of course, the wrestlers (numbering in the thousands). Norwich is a community with a long-standing tradition of excellence in athletics, so it has been a privilege and a wonderful experience for me to be a part of it."

That inner humbleness became manifest during the bowels of The Great Depression as Kovalchik was born to an Italian mother (Filomena) and Ukrainian father (Michael) on July 31, 1936 in the borough of Manhattan in New York City. Employment at that time was scarce in NYC, so his parents moved approximately 40 miles to Somerville, NJ, where they found work in a local factory. There, the 6-week-old Don and later his younger brother (James) and sister (Nancy) settled into what Kovalchik called a typical melting pot neighborhood, with a mix of ethnicity and race.

Like in other neighborhoods across the country, the local children partook mainly in football, basketball and baseball, but Kovalchik became the first kid from that locale to take up wrestling. "I was small in high school but

I could run. As a freshman, I ran the quarter mile on the track team and the assistant coach (Fred Christ), who was also the varsity wrestling coach, suggested I come out for wrestling, so I did as a sophomore and liked it," recalled Kovalchik.

From Somerville, where he captained the wrestling team his senior year, Kovalchik went on to matriculate at Rutgers University, where he majored in English and minored in Spanish and Social Studies. While at Rutgers, he received a state scholarship to help with tuition and worked in the college library to defray other costs. That library job earned Kovalchik, who also captained the Rutgers team his senior year, the moniker "Scholarly Grappler" when he was pictured in the school's newspaper.

Following graduation and in need of employment, he almost signed on with a local insurance company as a claims adjuster, but was talked out of it by his old high school coach Christ. With Christ's help, Kovalchik received an emergency certification to teach and became a part-time substitute. Not long after that, he returned to where it all began – Somerville – and assisted with the wrestling program, while teaching English full time and pursuing his Master's degree at Rutgers. That first season (1958-59) Somerville sported five grapplers in the state finals and two years later (1960-61) three were crowned New Jersey champions. Kovalchik, who was inducted into the Somerville Hall of Fame as both an athlete and a coach, remained there until his move to Norwich in 1969.

While his wrestling legacy is manifest in the aforementioned won-lost records and numerous championships, his clothing and lifestyle malapropisms have endeared him to his former grapplers. "Coach K' is a child of The Depression and a bit of a homesteader," notes Ryan. "He butchers and processes his own meat and cans vegetables and sauce, affording him a subsistent lifestyle. We've often joked that one could live for five years never leaving his basement. And, his clothing attire is something that has always been a topic for comic relief. He jokes that he hangs onto items knowing they will return to the forefront of the fashion world."

Hagenbuch recalls when Kovalchik first sought him out after transferring to Norwich. "I will never forget my first impression of 'Coach K'. It wasn't just the cowboy boots, but he had on plaid polyester pants with a pea green tie and a crazy pastel-colored shirt. He was known for his wardrobe."

Ryan also recalls his approach to dealing with pain. "His methods of pain relief sometimes reflect his aged approach. On the night I tore my ACL; he came onto the mat as I was writhing in pain and grabbed my bottom lip as though he

was hoisting a seven-pound largemouth bass into the boat. I remember looking up at him with a look that said, "What the hell are you doing?" He never flinched and stated, "You don't feel the pain in your knee anymore do ya."

But clothing styles, eating habits and pain relief panaceas are not why Kovalchik has been honored as one of NHS' greatest coaches. And, there is much more to his legacy than just matches won and crowns worn.

"Coach K' treated everyone on his team as an individual. He took the time to get to know each and every one of his athletes on a personal level," pointed out Downey. "I believe that is one of the biggest reasons why so many people love him. He was like a second father to all of his athletes. He cared deeply and sincerely about each and every one of them, getting involved in their interests and hobbies as well as their athletic abilities.

"He was a remarkable coach. He not only taught me how to wrestle, but through athletics, he taught me the skills that I would need to succeed in life," added Downey. "He taught me how to be a leader and how to overcome adversity. He is one of the main reasons I have become who I am today."

Hagenbuch echoes Downey's sentiments. "If I can be half the coach he was, I will have accomplished a lot. He taught me not to give up on a kid, not any kid. There were times when I was coaching modified and I wanted to throw kids off the team, but I'd remember how 'Coach K' would handle the situation. He always said kids need wrestling more than wrestling needs them. This is my first year as a varsity coach and it's always a nice feeling seeing him walk into the room. He will always be a huge part of so many wrestlers' lives. He's a great ambassador for the sport, and I know I get my passion from knowing and being around him the past 28 years of my life."

Kovalchik throughout his career has promoted and facilitated projects to boost the sport of wrestling; that is the Section IV team tournament, multi-level state competition, coach/official relationships, team rankings, novice tournaments and tourney clinics. He was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame (Upstate New York Chapter) in 2005 and is still active as a member of its Board of Directors. He also gained enshrinement in the Section IV Hall of Fame this past February.

"I am happy that dozens of our wrestlers have gone on to coach or officiate in this area and out of state," said Kovalchik. "Even more, I'm proud that so many of our graduates have become successful in business, the military, medicine, education, the legal field and other professions as well as agriculture, skilled labor and mechanics."

Although he turned a young 80 years of age on July 31, Kovalchik remains an active volunteer with the Norwich

wrestling program. When not schooling new grapplers, he still tends to the duties of maintaining his Mount Upton farm that he shares with his wife of 56 years, Barb. They are the parents of three adult children – Ken (Albany area), Brian (Syracuse area) and Sue (Alaska).

Scott Ryan may have summed up 'Coach K's' life the best. "Contribution is measured in the lives you touch. He is being honored as a coach, but his contributions to the many lives he touched far outweigh the accolades that he achieved on the Purple mats."

Amen to that!

—Tom Rowe