

Don Jackson—A Wrestler's Life By Stan Bishop



Coach Don Jackson

Because West Hempstead H. S. did not offer varsity wrestling, inductee Don Jackson took up cross-country and track, both of which he continued at Colgate University. At Colgate, however, exposure to wrestling in a physical education class was all Don needed.

While doing graduate work at Springfield College, wrestling courses taught by Coach Ray Sparks convinced Don that he had found his life's work. Don never thought that his late start was a liability; instead this circumstance made him receptive to techniques and styles absorbed from other great coaches beginning with Ray.

With a Springfield MA in hand, Don enlisted in the Navy reserves, serving two years of active duty. An assignment as physical training instructor at the Bainbridge Naval Training Center in Maryland gave him his first coaching opportunity. The next year found Don on the icebreaker *U.S. Edisto* with Boston as a home port. Working out at the YMCA brought him in touch with Jim Peckham who later coached the U.S. Olympic team.

After discharge from the Navy, Don signed on in the Bellmore-Merrick School District where his association with great coaches continued. Don worked with them all—Sprig Gardner, Ken Hunte, Bob Bury, John Schaefer, Nick Sabetto. The tremendous talent, super sports tradition, and supportive administration all contributed to Don's growth as a teacher and coach. He remembers Ken Hunte as one who "could inspire a cement block to walk" and Bob Bury as "one of the best technicians I have ever met."

After a happy 10-year stint coaching at Grand Ave., Mephram, and Bellmore Kennedy, Don went on to Smithtown H.S. where he

served as head coach for the next 13 years. In this capacity he engineered his share of successes, including seven champions, 16 finalists, and 28 placewinners in Suffolk County. In New York State tournaments Don had one champion, two finalists, and six placewinners. After retiring from head coaching, Don worked as assistant coach at Smithtown East Jr. H.S., Ward Melville H.S., and Port Jefferson H.S.

During his 33 year coaching career Don continuously worked on the coaches' clinic circuit. Having had so many great mentors almost obliged him to share his knowledge to an audience greater than just his own team. This began by assisting Sprig Gardner at his summer clinics at Gettysburg College. Other venues include the National Wrestling Coaches' Clinic in Wildwood, NJ, Northeastern Wrestling Coaches' Clinic, Empire State Coaches' Clinic, Clarion State Wrestling Coaches' Clinic, Connecticut H.S. Wrestling Coaches' Assoc. Clinic, NYS Catholic H.S. Wrestling Coaches' Clinic, and the NYS AAHPHERD Wrestling Clinic.

At the same time Don has offered his leadership to wrestling organizations. He has served as president of the NYS Wrestling Coaches' Assn., president of the Section XI Wrestling Coaches' Assn., and vice-president of the National Wrestling Coaches' Assn. as well as working on its Executive Committee.

Now in retirement, Don and his wife Eileen split their time between Chazy Lake in the Adirondacks where his neighbor is John Shaefer his successor at Bellmore Kennedy and Sebastian, Florida. Early in retirement he and John participated in kayak racing, but now Don is content with staying in shape for his grandchildren.

A wise man once said, "To whom much is given, much is expected." Don received his gifts, and then spent the rest of his life sharing them with others at local, state, and national levels. With good reason the Friends of Long Island Wrestling is honored to induct Don into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.