

Walter Stewart

A founder of Suffolk County Wrestling



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Walter Stewart joins Lon Kittle, Jumper Leggio, and Joe Valla in the pantheon of founding fathers of Suffolk County wrestling.

Like many early wrestlers, Walter entered the sport through the back door. During his senior year at Bayside High School, Walter learned about wrestling first from his assistant Scoutmaster and then from a student

teacher, both of whom had wrestled in college.

World War II interrupted Walter's new interest. He served in the last ski troop regiment that fought in Italy. His efforts garnered an American Theater Ribbon, a European Theater Ribbon, two Bronze Stars, and a WWII Victory medal.

After the war Walter matriculated at New York University where he wrestled for four years and captained the 1949-50 squad. Knowing that a future high school coach must learn from the best, he secured a student teaching position at Mepham High School where he mastered Sprig Gardner's famous drill system.

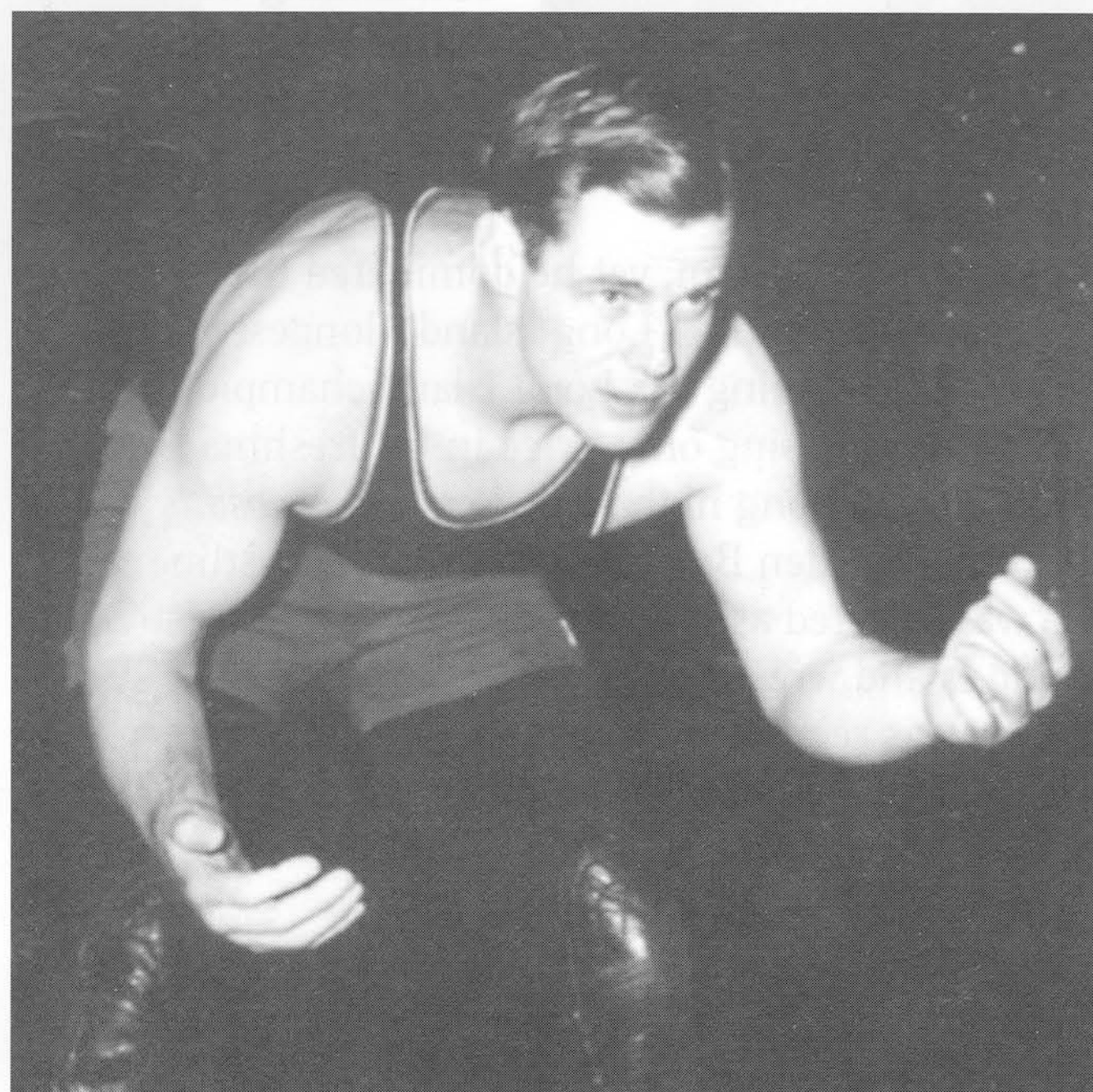
In 1951 the Riverhead School District hired Walter to take over the wrestling program which he ran until retirement in 1985. During his tenure he was assisted by Dean Stupke, John Haas, and Joe Sferlazza. These coaches in turn later helped establish wrestling programs at Lindenhurst, Walt Whitman, and Huntington High Schools.

Over a 35 year period, Walter coached 89 wrestlers to championships at various tournaments beginning with Walter Gatz's victory at the Eastern Long Island Tournament in 1951. Walter's wrestlers competed and won in various Suffolk tournaments, The Mepham Invitational, and later in the Section Eleven Tournament. In 1963, at the first New York State Intersectional tournament held at Cornell, Riverhead's Walter Miles finished second to Calhoun's Tom Schlendorf. That season, Riverhead won both the League A-1 Championship and the Section Eleven

Championship. In that tournament the team had six finalists and four champions.

Wrestling has always been a part of Walter's family life. In 1953 he married Elizabeth Anne Nemety. She is his "true friend and wonderful wife and mother" to their four children—Jim, Emily, Betty, and Nancy who have given Walter and Elizabeth seven grandchildren.

Jim was coached by his father at Riverhead and went on to wrestle and graduate from Gettysburg College. He now teaches and coaches soccer and



Walter Stewart wrestled for four seasons at New York University

wrestling at East Hampton High School. Emily is a kindergarten teacher. Betty married Jeff Thomas, a two-time New York State champion for Huntington High School and Big Ten champion for Michigan State. Together they operate Airstocks, Inc., an airplane parts brokerage company. Nancy, a Penn State graduate, was vice-president of the Nittany Lions Wrestling Club. She now works with Jeff and Betty.

After WWII only a handful of wrestling programs existed on Long Island. Thanks to men like Walter Stewart Nassau and Suffolk now have nearly 60 teams each.