

Grandfather figure: Hatters' rise to wrestling prominence began with Morris

By Richard Gregory Updated 8:38 pm, Tuesday, October 18, 2016



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FILE PHOTO: Mike Morris, architect of Danbury High School's wrestling dynasty, referees at the Jan. 19, 2008 New Milford High School wrestling tournament

Mike Morris is widely regarded as the Grandfather of **Danbury High School Wrestling** — and with good reason.

While he wasn't the one who started the program — it had been up and running for a good 10 years when he took over as the Hatters' head varsity coach in 1979 — he was the one who raised it from its infancy into a full-grown juggernaut, who elevated it from nearly dormant to utterly dominant.

It wasn't easy. It took a lot of work, an extraordinary amount of foresight and plenty of help from the community.

The program's accomplishments, from Morris' time as head coach (1979-1991) to the present are staggering: 32 FCIAC team titles since 1981, including 29 of the last 30; 18 Class LL state titles since 1989, including 14 straight from 1997-2010; and 12 State Open team titles since team scores were incorporated in 2001. Morris' 1990 Hatter squad was the first team from Connecticut – and, to this day, one of only two Connecticut teams – to win a New England team title. Windham was the other New England champ in 1992.

More Information

DANBURY HIGH SCHOOL
WRESTLING

COACHING CHRONOLOGY

CoachDual-meet record

Bob Gilchrist (1968-69)19-3-2

Ernie Guckel (1970-71)19-5-0

James Trocolla (1972-78)55-49-2

Mike Morris (1979-91)219-36-0

John Nimock (1992-99)167-8-1

Ricky Shook (2000-present)324-19-0

The entire Danbury wrestling program and everyone involved with it since Day 1 in the late 1960s – the wrestlers, the coaches, the volunteers, the families and the army of supporters throughout the community – will be enshrined on Friday in the **Danbury High School Athletic Hall of Fame**.

The hall of fame banquet, entitled “Decades of Dominance,” will be held at the Amber Room Colonnade in Danbury.

It'll be an evening to celebrate the generations of Hatter greats – and the man who planted the

seeds of greatness.

“Mike Morris was the person who made our program what it is today,” said current Hatters coach **Ricky Shook**, a two-time FCIAC champion and the 1983 Class L 112-pound state champion under Morris' tutelage. “He got the right people involved, he was great motivator and he knew how to get the most out of you. He demanded respect from everyone on our team, no matter if you were a great wrestler or not. He taught me many life lessons over the years, and he is a great

friend. You can ask anyone who he has coached. They all have a tremendous amount of respect for him."

Prior to taking over the head coach's position in the summer of 1979, Morris – who grew up in The Bronx, hadn't wrestled in high school and had wrestled only briefly in college – was teaching and coaching the football team at the recently opened **Rogers Park Middle School**. Another teacher at the school, **Scott Clay**, had started a wrestling club and enlisted Morris to help him. After two years, Clay moved on and left the club in Morris' hands.

"The principal called me in and said 'Look, I need you to do me a favor and run this club until I can get someone to take over,'" Morris recalled in a phone interview from his home in New Milford Tuesday afternoon.

"He had no intention of finding someone else," Morris continued with a chuckle. "He had me suckered into that, so I took over the wrestling program there. Scott left me a couple moves for the bottom, a couple moves for the top and a takedown, and we just drilled them right into the ground."

It probably didn't seem like it at the time, but that right there was the pouring of the foundation for what would become one of the top high school wrestling programs in New England.

At that time, across town at **Broadview Middle School**, was another feeder program, as wrestling was really beginning to get a foothold in Danbury. However, Morris was stunned by what he saw when he watched his first high school varsity match.

"(Former Danbury athletic director and football coach) **Ed Crotty** called me up one day and he said come on up and watch this match," said Morris, who retired from teaching in 2005. "I went up, and I couldn't believe it. We were forfeiting six weight classes. We had two feeder programs. I told Mr. Crotty after I watched that match, I said 'Look, I can do a better job than this.' That summer, he hired me."

The rest, as they say, is history – although it certainly didn't happen overnight. Things didn't really start to take off for the Hatters, Morris recalled, until a reconnaissance mission of sorts into the heart of wrestling country, Pennsylvania.

"We went out to Pennsylvania, and I went into this building and there were 15 to 20 mats. I had never seen that before," Morris said. "All these matches were going on, and on every mat, 6-year-old kids were doing things my varsity wrestlers weren't doing. It was really an eye-opener. When we came back from that, we threw everything out and built a whole new curriculum off that."

The trip also spawned the idea of an elementary school wrestling program in Danbury.

"Our goal was to have a team at every elementary school, with a mat," Morris said. "That proved not to be logistically sound, but we had five schools. That started everything up from there."

The elementary and middle school feeder programs provided — and still provide — the kids of Danbury a chance to wrestle for as many as eight or nine years before they even reach high school. Once those programs were in place, it didn't take long before their impact was felt at the high school.

"By the time they got to me, they were technically sound. They had 200 matches under their belts. The first day, most varsity programs are teaching stuff. I didn't. We just drilled. We just went right to the mat," said Morris, who served as a wrestling referee for many years after he stopped coaching, until undergoing knee-replacement surgery.

All the success of the high school program through the years has served as a constant affirmation for everything being done with the feeder programs. In fact, many of the kids on that 1990 New England championship team were products of those feeder programs. That team, led by New England champions **Jeff Vitti** at 119 pounds and **DeMaine Dillard** at 189, showed the kids of Danbury that they could achieve what was once considered impossible.

"I asked a guy from Rhode Island one time 'What do we have to do to win the New Englands?' He said 'You have to put two guys in the finals, and you have to have two guys score points,'" Morris recalled. "The year we won, we put Dillard and Vitti in the finals, and they both won, and **Ben Appel** and **Ben Levitt** both won a couple matches. We beat Mount Anthony by one or two points that year."

More important than the wins and losses and championship banners, however, is the gritty determination Morris instilled in his program, a trait which has been passed down from one year to the next and stands as one of the pillars of the Hatters' winning tradition.

"I've always said, it takes a certain type of kid to be a wrestler," Morris said.

And it takes a certain type of coach to make a wrestling program great.

For tickets to the hall of fame banquet, contact Betsy Merullo at 203-744-1223.

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