

Wrestling Insider: Brentwood honors 'Gov'



Brentwood brought back legendary wrestling coach Joe Campo to the school to have the Ross Gymnasium named after him -- the Joe "Gov" Campo Gym. (Newsday/Joseph D. Sullivan / January 22, 2008)

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Twenty-three years ago at Brentwood, a longtime wrestling coach was wrapping up his legendary career, while a 112-pounder named Ralph Napolitano capped his senior season with all-league honors.

Little did the coach know back then, that almost a quarter century later, that young wrestler would be head coach at Brentwood and would bring the Hall of Fame coach back to the school to have the Ross Gymnasium named after him -- the Joe "Gov" Campo Gym.

That ceremony took place on Friday before Brentwood's 42-16 win over Sachem East. The always-humble Campo, who will be 83 in May, seemed overcome by such an honor.

"I loved it," he said. "I never felt so much love in all my life. I just hope and pray that I deserve it."

After coaching 37 county champions and amassing 252 wins over 20 seasons, it's safe to say that Campo deserved the recognition.

"It was long, long, long overdue," said Jerry Goodfellow, one of those 37 county champions, who is a current assistant at Hauppauge and both wrestled and coached under Campo.

The man they called "Gov" (short for "the Governor of New York State coaches") won seven county titles in a row and eight of nine from 1968-69 through the 1976-77 season. Brentwood hasn't won since, but is the favorite to take the crown this season.

"It would be an honor to be mentioned along with coach Campo," Napolitano said about potentially winning the county title. "It's the ultimate dream that I have."

Brentwood is 13-1 this season, with its only loss coming to the top-ranked team in the state, Spencerport (Section V). But, according to Campo, the wrestlers can't take anything for granted.

"They're going to have to work hard to win that county tournament," he said. "Improve, and work hard."

Those were the same ideals he espoused in his time as a coach, and they worked to the tune of 345 career wins -- 26th all-time in New York State. Eighty-four of those victories came at Frankfort-Schuyler High School, a Section III school outside of Utica, where Campo was an alum.

But before the 1965-66 season, Campo heard about an opportunity to teach and coach at a school on Long Island, and he jumped at the chance. Though he wasn't from Brentwood, he immersed himself in the community, living just five blocks from the school during his coaching days.

"I knew Long Island was a tough area for wrestling, so I wanted to see what I could do there," Campo said.

It took him a couple of years to get the program going, but once it did, it became one of the greatest dynasties in Long Island wrestling history. And according to those who were there, like Goodfellow, Campo always deflected the attention to where he thought it belonged -- with the wrestlers.

"All the credit he gave to all his kids," said Goodfellow, who was second in the state at 98 pounds in 1972 and went on to become a collegiate all-American at SUNY Brockport.

When Napolitano came back to Brentwood to teach in 1993, he thought that Campo had already been honored in some way -- "I assumed something was done," he said. But when it came to his attention that nothing had been, he went to the administration to see what could be done.

Napolitano's efforts yielded what he called "a beautiful night for a great man."

The current coach even invited the former coach back on the bench for one more night.

Said Campo: "It felt like being home."