

I - The town where wrestling is king

Year after year, title after title, a high school team lifts up a struggling South Jersey community.

Apr 22, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

"Let's go!" Paul Morina yelled. "Pop the head! Pop and snap the head!" The opening tournament of the wrestling season was eight days away. Morina, head coach of the Paulsboro High School team, was teaching takedowns, how to bring your adversary to the mat.

He wanted the wrestlers to attack with fury, to hold nothing back, to wrestle as if something sacred were at stake. In his mind, something was: the tradition of Paulsboro wrestling .

A fire alarm went off. "The hell with that," he barked. Two assistants slipped out to investigate.

Tommy Giorgianni, Morina's nephew, a senior, shoved cotton up his bloody nose and kept banging.

Junior James Funk wrestled even though he was woozy. He had given blood earlier that day, and now the inside of his forearm was swelling like a purple egg.

Morina, his green eyes flashing, his own thickened wrestler's body damp with sweat, was not satisfied. Not even close. He wanted more.

"We're gonna be ranked number one in the state, 10th in the nation. That don't mean anything," Morina shouted. "That's a jinx. You want something? Get on that wall. That wall means something."

The names of 19 New Jersey state champions and 75 regional champions were painted in red letters on one wall of the wrestling room. Eleven of the 33 wrestlers on this South Jersey team were related to somebody on that wall.

The only sounds in the humid room were wrestlers' grunts and thuds of bodies slamming the mats. Sweat soaked through shirts and sweatshirts. One mother would wring her son's clothes out later. "It was as if he had been standing in the rain," she said.

After two hours of wrestling, the boys sprinted the stairs and the halls before Morina gathered them back in the wrestling room.

"You new guys, first-timers, you're getting a rude awakening," he said. "This is what it takes. Everybody out there is looking at us and trying to tear us down. They're all going after Paulsboro. We can beat them all. This is the hardest part. The first month. You're gonna grow up here."

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In Paulsboro , wrestling is more than a sport. It is nearly a religion.

Wrestling is a link, a connection, binding one generation to the next. Old men show up at matches wearing Paulsboro wrestling jackets, displaying their year and weight class. Former state champions drop by the wrestling room to school rising stars.

Children start wrestling as early as kindergarten, and when they join the high school team, they become guardians of a proud tradition. They face high expectations and great pressure to win. They give a tired old refinery town joy.

Coming into the 2000-01 season, Paulsboro High, with just 536 students, had built a record of achievement rivaled by few sports programs at any level. It had won 18 consecutive state wrestling championships, the longest active streak in the nation.

Since the program began in 1939, Paulsboro's record was 778 wins, 54 losses, and 12 ties. The Red Raiders had won nine of every 10 matches for 58 years.

In Morina's 15 years as head coach, Paulsboro's record was 301-7-4, a .965 winning percentage. For the last two years, the team had been undefeated against schools of all sizes and ranked No. 1 in the state.

In this Gloucester County town, whose population has fallen from 8,200 to 6,100 in recent decades, wrestling embodies a community's intense struggle to survive.

One thousand people will go to a big wrestling match on a Saturday night, including Joe Giovannitti, 69, who has sat in the same spot on the pine bleachers for half a century. One hundred fans will pile into chartered buses and cross the state for big rivalries.

Morina has the help of nine paid and unpaid assistant coaches. One of them, Steve Anuszewski, proposed to his wife at a Paulsboro wrestling match, popping the question, "Will you marry me, Carol?" on the sign where wrestlers' names usually go. She wept and Paulsboro swept that night, 62-0.

Some nights, first and second graders sprint down school hallways - training just as their fathers, uncles and brothers did. The high school team practices even on Christmas morning.

Paulsboro, just 2.2 square miles, lies across the Delaware River from Philadelphia International Airport. Its fate parallels that of many other aging industrial towns.

Paulsboro began the 20th century with promise: A new high school was built, with names of great poets - Longfellow, Whittier, Irving - engraved across the front, reflecting the optimism of the day. A new oil refinery, second largest in the Northeast, opened in 1917, bringing jobs and prosperity.

A community blossomed: two movie theaters, car dealers, dress shops and bakeries, bowling alleys. The bank gave out \$1 million in mortgages every month.

And wrestling took root.

"Wrestling fit in well with Paulsboro's people because it was something to get their arms around," said Joe Giovannitti Jr., a caterer in town and a former regional champ. "The sport of wrestling was a reflection of their struggles to survive in the real world. And that struggle continues today."

As the century faded, so did the town and many of its dreams.

Families moved to newer homes in West Deptford, Logan Township, and other suburbs. Jobs disappeared. The refinery was busier than ever, now refining six million gallons of oil a day, but needed fewer workers to operate. Once 3,000 people worked there; now only 530 do. A once-bustling downtown turned empty and desolate.

As Paulsboro declined, high school sports grew even more important, wrestling above all.

As a new season approached last fall, the pressure on wrestlers and coaches to uphold the tradition was immense.

Paulsboro had not lost a match in two and a half seasons - 56 matches in a row. It had not lost in South Jersey's 10-team Colonial Conference in 29 years. That represented 243 consecutive wins against conference schools - most of which have more students.

With 10 varsity wrestlers returning from the previous year's team, Paulsboro looked to be dominant again, a good bet to win a 19th straight state title for small schools.

But as he observed those early-season practices, Paul Morina, 42, wondered if the team understood what was required, what sacrifices must be made.

Did the wrestlers appreciate how much was at stake?

Early on Thanksgiving morning, Morina was on his hands and knees in the high school's wrestling room, replacing the rotting plywood floor beneath the mats. The first official practice was the next day.

He had been working on the floor for a week with his father, Babe. Afterward, he mopped the mats, wiped down the walls, and set off a "fog bomb" to kill germs that cause skin diseases. Morina made it home by 3 p.m., in time for turkey dinner with his family. The wrestling room is plain and unpretentious. Red mats cover the floor. The plaster walls are red and white. Two weary old heaters hang from the ceiling by each door and crank constantly.

The first practice, the day after Thanksgiving, began, as every practice does, with the team weighing in. The wrestlers stripped down to their undies and hopped on the scale. They were brutal and comical with one another as they waited in line.

"What you weigh?" one asked.

"142."

"Fat ass."

Ryan O'Hara weighed in at 121 pounds.

He was trying to get down to 112.

"I had socks on," he explained.

O'Hara, a junior, was a favorite of the coaches. He had wrestled like a demon the previous year, only to break his jaw during a match in March. His jaw had been wired shut for months, and doctors forbade him to wrestle until the season started. The one thing he could do was lift weights, and he did it all summer, reaching a high of 134 pounds.

In September, he began cutting weight. He carried a calculator around the house, counting the calories of whatever he ate.

"If O'Hara can go 112, he'll be the best in the state," Anuszewski, the assistant coach, said at a preseason meeting.

That was a big if.

Wrestlers compete in 14 weight classes, from 103 to heavyweight, up to 275 pounds. They have always tried to shed extra pounds to gain a competitive advantage. But cutting weight can be dangerous. In 1997, the deaths of three college wrestlers - in North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Michigan - were attributed to rapid weight loss.

High school wrestling officials nationally are trying to banish the ritual of weight-cutting. "We're lucky at the high school level we haven't had a death," said Jerry Diehl of the National Federation of State High School Associations. "But we'll never know how many near-misses we've had. And we don't know what we've done psychologically to kids."

Morina believes dropping weight is an indispensable part of wrestling. He also believes it can be done safely. This season, he invited Maria Elena Hallion, a professor of nutrition and sports medicine at Cabrini College, to speak to his wrestlers.

Hallion grew up in a Paulsboro wrestling family. Her father and uncle were state champs. She told the wrestlers to eat three small, healthy meals each day, avoid junk food, and drink a lot of water.

"It is recommended a wrestler drink two gallons of water a day," she said, picking up an empty gallon milk jug. "At least. And that's minimal. Two a day."

The wrestlers were silent, awestruck. Nobody drinks that much water a day.

Water is heavy.

"Don't chug it," Hallion said. "Chugging water will go right to your bladder, and it goes right out. The darker your urine, the more dehydrated you are."

The best things in life have come to Paul Morina through wrestling - his friends, his education, his job, even his wife, Sandi.

She was introduced to him by his top assistant and close friend, Dean Duca. On their first date, they went to another coach's house, where everyone talked wrestling. They were married in 1995. Five hundred people came to the wedding. He had 13 ushers - one for each weight class, he joked.

When their babies were born, Sandi just smiled when Paul put small pieces of wrestling mats in their playpens. She understood the deal.

Paul Morina's roots in Paulsboro go back to 1930, when his grandfather moved from Altoona to work in the Mobil (now Valero) refinery. One year later, the grandfather was cleaning a refinery smokestack and fell to his death, leaving behind a wife and 10 children.

Paul's father, Babe, got a job in Woodbury making footlockers for Army soldiers. That's where he met his wife, Mary Matteo. They raised five children - three girls and two wrestlers.

Back in 1966, Paul and his older brother, Carmel, were playing baseball in their yard, and Carmel hit the ball so hard it rolled all the way to the Catholic school a block away. When they retrieved the ball, they looked inside the gym and saw boys wrestling. They went in and, in a figurative sense, never came out.

"As little kids, we'd put on long johns and a pair of shorts to look like high school wrestling uniforms," recalled Carmel Morina, now 44 and police chief in neighboring Gibbstown. "We'd get an egg timer, set it for two minutes, and we'd wrestle . . . always for the state championship."

All through high school they wrestled. They would come home from practice and keep wrestling.

"They wrestled so much," their father said, "I'd have to get a broom to break them up."

In 1975, Carmel won a state championship. In 1977, his senior year, Paul Morina reached the state championship match in the 158-pound class.

His opponent was a better pure wrestler. But Morina believed his conditioning would give him an edge. A high school wrestling match in New Jersey is three periods, two minutes each. Morina prided himself on being able to go flat-out for the whole match: "Six hard minutes."

"I knew if I could keep the match close," Morina said, "I could win in the third period."

With 54 seconds left, the clock on the scorers' table disconnected. Paul Morina was behind by three points, but he had felt his opponent weakening. "He was dead," Morina remembers now, 24 years later. "I had him."

It took a couple of minutes to restart the clock. In wrestling, two minutes of rest is an eternity. Morina felt he had lost his advantage. He attempted a risky move and landed on his back, and his opponent scored big points. Morina lost, 16-5.

He resolved to work harder.

He went to Virginia's James Madison University on a wrestling scholarship and was a two-time Eastern regional champion. When he graduated, Morina wanted to go home to Paulsboro. He became a physical education teacher and an assistant wrestling coach. Wrestling had given him discipline, an education, a way of life.

Morina took over as head coach in 1985, when he was still single. He bought a house on Roosevelt Street and at one time had seven Paulsboro wrestlers staying with him. Morina said he invited wrestlers into his home to help them eat well, avoid late nights, and stay focused on wrestling.

He would bring them to his mother's for dinner, so they would eat right. Morina's mother used to feel sorry for them, they looked so skinny. Once, when Morina went to the bathroom, she sneaked a piece of chocolate cake to Joey Redman, a future regional champ.

Even after getting married, Morina continued taking in wrestlers.

Jermaine Ruffin, known as Pickle, lived with Paul and Sandi Morina for three years of high school. He moved out in 1997, the day Sandi went into labor with the Morinas' second child.

Ruffin says he was not a bad guy, just lazy. Morina pushed him hard, and after a while Ruffin began to push himself. He won two state championships at heavyweight and now plays football for Rowan University.

"It's really easy to get caught up in the streets," said Ruffin, who is 6-foot-2 and 315 pounds. "Staying with Coach Morina helped me keep away from all that. They treated me like a son, and I thank them dearly for it."

Before this season started, Morina had hoped that senior Greg Croce, the varsity wrestler at 145 pounds, would live with him.

"This is his last hope. Right here," Morina told his assistant coaches, who were gathered around his kitchen table for a preseason meeting. "He messes up, he's done."

Croce was once destined to be a state champion, coaches believed. He was the most talented wrestler on the team, a technical artist who had wrestled since age 4. In his freshman year, he beat Mark Manchio of Sterling High School in Camden County, who went on to win three state championships and lost only two bouts in his entire high school career. But coaches felt Croce was undisciplined, that his commitment had waned. Talk of his becoming a state champ had ceased after his sophomore year.

Croce declined Morina's invitation. He wanted to live at home.

There is nothing Paul Morina hates more than seeing a Paulsboro wrestler get pinned. In his mind, it signifies surrender - a lack of hard work, discipline and desire.

At one early December practice, Morina introduced a drill designed to prevent that humiliation.

He had the wrestlers pair off. One wrestler on the mat arched his back, his hips high in the air, and supported himself with his head and his feet, three points touching the mat. No hands. It was intended to strengthen neck muscles.

A partner then sat on the bridging wrestler, resting his feet on the teammate's shoulders.

"No pins!" Morina screamed, urging the wrestlers to keep their shoulder blades off the mat.

Tom Curl, the junior heavyweight, expected to contend for a state championship, yelled repeatedly: "I will not be pinned!"

Later, Morina said: "What's great about wrestling, you don't have to be the best athlete, you don't even have to be the best wrestler. You have to be in the best shape. The harder you work for something, the harder it is to surrender.

"Six hard minutes of wrestling," Morina said. "That's why we win."

On Monday, Dec. 11, five days before the first tournament of the season, Greg Croce was suspended from school for being late repeatedly.

He was barred from practice for two days, and Morina was furious. Morina knew how important Croce was to the team. He set the tone. If Croce showed dedication, so would others. If he lacked commitment, others might follow his example.

In those first few weeks of practice, Morina did not like what he saw. Practices were not as intense or as focused as he wanted. In his mind, the team acted as if it could win on reputation alone.

On Dec. 14, two days before the opening tournament in Caldwell, in North Jersey, Morina assembled his team. To an outsider, that day's practice had seemed intense. But not to Morina.

"In my 15 years of coaching, never have I had a worse start," he said. "This is probably one of the three or four most talented teams I've had. That's what's killing me. Your problem is all mental. I'm going to make you or break you."

II - Right from the start, a tough test

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By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Fifty of Paulsboro's most avid wrestling fans huddled in the high school parking lot before dawn, sipping Wawa coffee.

They waited in red Paulsboro jackets for a luxury coach to take them to the first wrestling event of the season. The bus was late.

Steam spiraled into the still-starry sky above the Valero oil refinery, just across the football field. Flames from three exhaust towers flickered high above, perpetual beacons.

The fans were cold and annoyed; 6:45 came and went. No bus. A few more minutes and they would carpool the 100 miles to Caldwell.

In a few hours, Paulsboro wrestlers would be competing against some of the state's best teams in northern New Jersey.

This would be the first test of the season. Paulsboro's Red Raiders were ranked No. 1 in the state, for the third year in a row. But many of these fans knew that coach Paul Morina was worried. He had been saying this year's team had been lulled by all the hype and was not working the way Paulsboro teams always have.

Was the coach overreacting? Some fans thought so. They expected to see their boys win as usual.

If the bus ever came.

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The first man at the high school that mid-December morning was John Rastelli, 78, who had chartered the bus.

Rastelli wrestled on Paulsboro's first team in 1939, before going off to war for three years. In his first and only match, he suffered worse injury than he ever did in combat. His elbow became caught between two canvas mats and his forearm broke. He was winning, too.

After the war, Rastelli became Paulsboro wrestling 's biggest booster. He started the midget program for grade-school boys in the 1960s. He founded and still helps oversee the nonprofit wrestling association, which buys varsity jackets for wrestlers and helps pay their way to summer tournaments and camps.

Ten weeks earlier, Rastelli had both knees replaced. He would not be able to walk to the top of the bleachers, his customary post at wrestling matches for the last 40 years, so he brought along his own folding chair, to sit matside.

Martha, his wife of 51 years, never goes to matches. "I'm not allowed to die during wrestling season," she jokes. "He'll pack me on ice until after the states."

Rastelli got up twice during the bus ride to Caldwell and loosened his new knees.

Mary Morina, the coach's mother, was also on the bus. She had awoken at 5:30 that morning and made eight sandwiches - ham and cheese, turkey - for her son and the other coaches.

"If you knew how many sandwiches I packed for wrestling all these years," she began, and laughed, as if one could count the stars in the sky.

When her sons Paul and Carmel wrestled, she always packed their bags for matches, filling them with food for after the weigh-ins.

Carmel always wanted a Chunky chocolate bar, and had to have the same towel. After four years of high school, the towel was in shreds. But he won a state championship. Maybe it was the towel.

Mary Morina was worried about her son Paul and the pressure on him to keep the program at the top. "He's not too young to get a heart attack," she said. "He expects to win, I tell you."

The night before the Caldwell tournament, Paul Morina had gathered his wrestlers in their locker room for a quick lecture on how to behave during the two-day trip.

"You shave," he told them. "Make sure your nails are trim. You don't swear. You don't steal nothing. You act like gentlemen. You get on the mat, you act like a no-good son of a bitch and kick their ass."

The team spent Friday night in a hotel. Weigh-ins were Saturday at 7 a.m.

The heart of the Paulsboro wrestling season is the dual-meet schedule - 20 contests pitting Paulsboro against a single opponent. The team had won 56 in a row coming into the season.

Twice each season, Paulsboro participates in eight-team tournaments. This was the first, Saturday, Dec. 16. It included some excellent teams. While the outcome wouldn't affect the streak, Paulsboro was sure to be tested.

The first Paulsboro wrestler to compete that day was David Smith. He had moved to Paulsboro that summer from Washington Township, where his father had helped build the youth wrestling program.

The Smith family had two boys. David, a freshman who weighed 97 pounds after a stack of pancakes, wrestled in the 103-pound class. Jeff, a senior, wrestled at 125 pounds.

Their father, Steve, bought a house in Paulsboro because he wanted his sons in a smaller high school and in Paul Morina's wrestling program.

In his first varsity match, David Smith was pinned 42 seconds into the second period.

Paulsboro senior Pat Trainor wrestled at 130. He had cut more than 20 pounds to get there. The match went back and forth, but in the end an exhausted Trainor lost, 5-4.

His opponent thrust his arms skyward.

He had beaten the Red.

Trevor Suter, a 15-year-old freshman, wrestled in his first varsity match at 140 pounds. It was a memorable day: A Suter was back in the Paulsboro lineup. Suter has two uncles who were state champions and two others who were regional champs. His father, Fred, was a district champ in 1982.

His mother, Judy, had married into the wrestling family, but she was the vocal, emotional one as Trevor made his debut.

"Come on, Trev! Work. Work. Work. Shoot! Shoot! Turn. Turn it! Do it again! Go. Go. Go. Go!"

His opponent, Nick Sutphen from Somerville, put Suter on his back, scoring five points.

"Fight. Fight. Fight!" his mother screamed. "Come on, Trev. Don't give it up!"

Suter survived. In the second period, he put Sutphen on his back. Mom was on her feet. Suter pinned his man. His mother fell back onto the bleachers and sighed, exhausted and relieved.

Another Paulsboro mother, Kathy Hunckler, whose son Matt now wrestles at George Mason University in Virginia, called over: "Judy, you're going to have a long four years, hon!"

"Oh, Lord," Judy Suter sighed.

Despite some excellent matches, Paulsboro looked surprisingly ordinary in the first round. Six of 14 wrestlers lost, infuriating Morina.

He led the wrestlers down a hallway, around a corner, and down another lonely hallway, far from the gym.

"Think practice," he shouted. "The way you practice is the way you perform on the mat. That's the bottom line. Pat Trainor, you were shooting a deer and missed two practices."

He turned to Greg Croce, a talented senior who he felt did not work hard enough.

"Greg, you're my mission," Morina said. "You know how many people told me to drop you? Plenty. But I'm not gonna drop you. You're gonna listen to me. I'm watching everything you do."

"If you change, this whole team changes."

Morina took a deep breath.

"Give me the jackets," he demanded. "I can't see us wearing the jackets and being the way we are."

The other coaches gathered up all the shiny new red warm-up jackets - the prized symbols of Paulsboro varsity wrestlers - and left the team alone.

The wrestlers slowly headed back toward the gym. There were no rousing speeches, no leaders taking command, no pledges or promises. Just embarrassment and sting.

The second round did not start much better than the first. Ryan O'Hara, 17, a junior, had struggled all week to drop to 112 pounds. He wrestled Albert Dattalo, one of three wrestling triplets from Randolph High School.

Dattalo, an excellent wrestler, won, 13-7. Morina was the first one on the mat to greet his defeated wrestler. "Way to wrestle," the coach said to O'Hara. "Good match."

A moment later, 16-year-old Keros Cooper, a Paulsboro sophomore and a defending regional champ, put a Somerville wrestler on his back, and Morina was on his feet: "Stick 'im!" the coach screamed. "Stick 'im!"

Cooper won big, but not by pin, giving him four points that would be added to the team's total at the end of the tournament.

In his second-round match, Suter was on his back, fighting off a pin.

"How bad do you want it?" Morina yelled.

Suter avoided the pin and reversed, but was caught on his back again later and pinned. Fans clapped as he left the mat. But Suter was in tears and rushed into a hallway to be alone.

Also in the second round, Croce took a lead, but ran out of energy and lost. When the match ended, he walked a few feet over to the gymnasium door and sprawled on the floor, flat on his back. Fans and teammates walked by silently.

Croce's father, Mick, came over and talked with him.

"He's not in shape yet," he explained. "He'll get there."

Croce wrestled again, lost, and was eliminated from the tournament. Later that afternoon, he sat by himself on the gym floor in street clothes.

John Rastelli walked over to offer encouragement.

"I go as hard as I can" in practice, Croce said. "I've thrown up every day.

"I'm so much better than both of the guys I lost to," he said. "That first guy, he was scared of me. But he could tell when I stopped. And he picked it up.

"I blame it on myself. I didn't do one thing this summer. I didn't even walk nowhere since I got my license. I gotta get my mind right."

That evening, in the finals, James Funk, a Paulsboro junior whose family had sacrificed summer vacations for years to take him to tournaments in Missouri or North Carolina, was leading late in the 189-pound match, but was running out of gas.

His father's cell phone rang in the stands. His mother was calling.

"He's winning, 4-0, with a minute to go. I'll call you later," Mike Funk snapped.

The father hung up and the son hung on, 4-3.

Five Paulsboro wrestlers won their weight classes. But that was two fewer than the year before, when Paulsboro won the tournament.

This time, Paulsboro finished third.

Third.

On the bus home, Betty Vogeding, a surrogate mother to Paulsboro wrestlers since the 1960s, tried to be positive. "Better than eighth or seventh or sixth," she said.

Many of the fans grumbled.

"They're just not in shape yet," Vogeding insisted.

The bus turned into the Paulsboro parking lot after 10 p.m.

Fog smothered the night. Even the refinery flames were a blur. The weather matched the fans' downcast mood. They were not used to losing.

III - From fill-in to the top of the world

Apr 24, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Mike Rastelli was in the Paulsboro High School locker room, breathing deeply through his inhaler. That night, he would wrestle varsity in Paulsboro's first home match of the season.

The 17-year-old junior was in the lineup against Vineland High School because Coach Paul Morina was disciplining one of his star wrestlers for missing a team run.

The previous season, Rastelli had compiled a record of 3 wins and 13 losses. To those familiar with his medical problems, it was remarkable that he could wrestle at all.

Rastelli was often the sacrificial lamb sent out against the opposing team's toughest wrestler. His mission was to stay off his back and avoid getting pinned.

This season, Rastelli did not know how many chances he would get to wrestle varsity. He wanted to make the most of his opportunity on this Wednesday night, five days before Christmas.

Paulsboro, ranked first in the state and undefeated for two years, would dominate Vineland. The team victory would not be cause for elation. It was expected, the only acceptable outcome.

Mike Rastelli would supply the elation.

When his turn came to wrestle, at 135 pounds, he sprinted to the center of the mat. Quickly, he took his man down, but lost control in a reversal. He kept fighting, scored a reversal of his own, and put his opponent, Matt Giordano, in a half nelson.

Rastelli turned Giordano on his side, then his back, and was on top of him, working for the pin.

The 500 fans were screaming; many were on their feet.

Carmel Morina, an assistant coach, was standing behind the team bench.

"If he pins this guy," he said, "the place will go nuts."

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Mike Rastelli weighed two pounds at birth. He had no pulse, no respiration, no reflexes. He was moved to the neonatal intensive care unit at Pennsylvania Hospital, where doctors slid a tube down his tiny throat and put him on a ventilator.

They were almost certain he would die. He had been born 12 weeks prematurely by cesarean section after his mother's placenta ruptured. His Apgar score - the measurement of a baby's health one minute after birth - was 2. Healthy babies score 9.

Kris Rastelli, then 19, unmarried and a freshman at Salem Community College, was unaware of what was happening to her son. She was fighting for her own life, with kidney and liver failure. Three weeks went by before she was well enough to leave the hospital. It was two more months before she could bring her baby home.

As an infant, Rastelli would not eat. He did not roll over. His hands were clenched.

"That's when doctors told me he had CP - cerebral palsy," said his mother, married now and known as Kris Morris.

"They told me they thought I should put him in an institution, that he'd never walk, that I'd never be able to handle all his problems," she said. "Of course, I never believed them."

Therapists told her that the goal was to get her son in a wheelchair, to get him to talk.

During physical therapy, 2 1/2-hour sessions seven times a week, he screamed so much that she was not allowed in the room. The therapist would try to straighten his tightly clenched legs. You would think those women were torturing him, she said.

Rastelli kept defying the odds, surprising the experts.

He finally walked before his third birthday. He so desperately wanted to be like other kids that he played midget football, wearing leg braces under his uniform.

Rastelli was hospitalized so often - for respiratory infections, dehydration - that he had his own room at Underwood-Memorial Hospital in Woodbury. He had surgery after surgery, on his lungs, his sinuses, his mouth.

In eighth grade, he wanted to wrestle. He suffered a broken collarbone on a takedown by Greg Croce, now a teammate.

He came back and kept at it. He grew into a young man, an excellent student.

"I've learned over the years," his mother says, "never tell him he can't."

Last season, his sophomore year, Mike Rastelli wanted to wrestle in the 119-pound slot because he thought he had a shot at making the varsity. To do that, he had to lose 26 pounds and outwrestle another boy. Rastelli lost the weight and won the match.

But that was the high point of his season.

The team and its fans saw him repeatedly get whipped. Brandon Becker, a regional champion from Kingsway High School in Swedesboro, pinned Rastelli in 12 seconds. Rastelli never quit. But not even the coaches knew what he was going through.

Before that season had begun, Rastelli had surgery for five hours to clean out his sinuses. They were so swollen and infected that doctors feared he would lose his vision.

He was taking heavy doses of prednisone, a steroid. He was using two inhalers for his asthma, one every morning and another before every match. He was dieting to make weight.

On the morning of a match against Haddonfield Memorial High School, Rastelli had his sinuses scraped again in an outpatient procedure. He did not tell Paul Morina. He wanted to wrestle. "He shouldn't have wrestled that night," his mother says, "but he loves it more than anything."

Rastelli lost. The next day, he lost a challenge match to a teammate and was back on the junior varsity.

Rastelli lifted weights all summer. He went to wrestling camps with the team in Iowa and in Lock Haven, Pa.

On Tuesday, Dec. 19, the night before the Vineland match, Morina told Rastelli he would be wrestling in place of sophomore Keros Cooper, a defending regional champ, in the 135-pound class.

Rastelli's mother was planning to go to Woodbury on the night of the match with her husband and parents to see her cousin inducted into the state police. When she heard that her son would be wrestling varsity, Morris canceled.

Rastelli's grandmother also skipped the induction. "I'm coming with you!" she told her daughter. "What's a nephew when your grandson is wrestling varsity!" Of course, his great-uncle, John Rastelli, the lifelong fan, was at the match. He never misses one.

Mike Rastelli warmed up behind the team bench. He did not just want a win, worth three team points. He wanted a pin, worth six.

He wanted to erase any doubt from last year. He did not want anyone to say that if Cooper had wrestled, the team would have gotten six points.

"I was nervous for him," his mother recalled. "I saw the board, I knew the opponent's name. I knew he wasn't going to be a pushover."

She whispered a quick prayer.

When Rastelli got his opponent on his back, his mother said a second prayer: "Please, God, he's got to pin him."

Rastelli, chest on chest, tightened his hold.

The referee raised his hand high and slammed it against the mat.

Pin.

Nearly all the spectators, old and young, were on their feet, clapping and screaming. Tears ran down Kris Morris' cheeks. Other parents and fans hugged her. They remembered how difficult it had been last season.

Rastelli shook hands with his opponent, ran across the mat toward his teammates, and leaped into their arms, like a running back going airborne to cross the goal line.

Paul Morina gave him a slap on the back, and turned to his assistant, Dean Duca. "That's what it's all about," he said.

Later, Mike Rastelli went home and ate a hot roast beef sandwich with cheese and a bowl of minestrone soup. His mother served him chocolate cake, but he ate only two bites.

IV - An uncommon exit, then a step forward

Apr 25, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The bus pulled into the parking lot of the Comfort Inn in Chesapeake, Va., just as the December sun was setting.

The Paulsboro wrestlers checked in - four to a room, same as the coaches - and then piled back into the bus and headed over to Deep Creek High School, site of the next day's tournament.

Their coach, Paul Morina, wanted them to run through a short practice, to keep them focused. The team had already wrestled that morning, before the six-hour trip.

Paulsboro had been coming to Deep Creek, one of the premier holiday tournaments on the East Coast, for 16 years. It was an adventure - two nights in a hotel, fresh competition.

The tournament would be the last big test before Paulsboro returned home to New Jersey and put its winning streak, now at 58 consecutive matches, on the line against rival Absegami High School near Atlantic City.

Paulsboro's long record of dominance was weighing heavily on the wrestlers and Morina. The people of Paulsboro expected excellence every year. Nothing less.

In this season, more than any other in recent memory, the Deep Creek tournament was critical. The team had already stumbled. Morina needed to know if his wrestlers had the mettle to pass a difficult test.

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One boy who did not make the trip that Thursday, Dec. 28, was Pat Trainor, a senior who had wrestled varsity for two years.

Trainor went to wrestling camps over the summer and skipped football to concentrate on wrestling. He had weighed 150 pounds in the fall, but wanted to wrestle at 130.

To cut weight, he ate tuna out of the can. No bread. Not even mayonnaise.

Ten days earlier, on Dec. 18, the team had a grueling practice. The coaches thought Trainor was not working hard enough. Assistant coach Dean Duca grabbed Trainor's shirt as they ran wind sprints.

"Come on, Pat!" he yelled. "Push it! Push it!"

Trainor felt he had nothing left.

"Why are we on your case?" Morina said to him after practice that day.

"Because we need you better."

That evening, Trainor cleaned out his locker.

He quit.

This was unheard of in Paulsboro, and the community reacted swiftly. Friends, coaches, fans called Trainor's house, called his grandparents. His mother faced questions at the beauty shop. Pat heard gibes at a restaurant, at the car wash.

Nobody wanted Trainor to wrestle more than his grandfather, Ray Williams.

He told Pat that he had worked hard and deserved to be out there. He counseled his grandson that if he quit, he would regret it years from now.

Trainor did not want to disappoint his Pop-Pop. But he was firm. He was done.

Trainor had wanted to quit a couple of weeks before he actually did. "By the time I quit, I didn't like it," he said. "I was doing it for my family."

Some teammates urged Trainor to come back. Others would not speak to him. For a few days, there was a handwritten sign on the wrestling room wall. It said "Wall of Quitters," and below: "Pat Trainor."

Morina believed that some of Trainor's friends, non-wrestlers, had pressured him to quit, to forget about losing weight and sacrificing, to have fun.

"People can say anything else they want," the coach said. "But that's the reason. Partying. That's what they want him to do. It's the new era, younger America nowadays."

Trainor thought Morina's expectations were unrealistic.

"He's like an old-school guy," Trainor said. "He's still living in the '80s or early '90s. He says in the old days, best friends would get on each other in practice, get into a fight even, if one felt the other wasn't working hard enough. That doesn't happen any more."

Trainor missed two matches, on the Wednesday and Saturday before Christmas. He was not wrestling, but his grandparents went anyway.

On Christmas morning, in keeping with Paulsboro tradition, the varsity wrestlers practiced for an hour.

Pat Trainor was not there. He was at home opening his presents, which were mostly wrestling-related. His mother had bought him a running suit, a radio and headphones to run with at night.

"There's another one you can return," she joked.

He kept them.

His grandparents had bought themselves a video camera for Christmas, so they could tape Pat's matches.

Morina had not given up. He needed Trainor. The boy had become part of the wrestling program, part of the family.

The day before the team left for Virginia, Morina and Duca picked up Trainor and drove over to Duca's house. They talked for an hour.

Trainor told them he would rejoin the team after Deep Creek.

On Friday, Dec. 29, the Paulsboro team was dropped off at Deep Creek High School for weigh-ins at 8 a.m. Duca and Marvin Hamilton, another assistant, went to a restaurant to pick up breakfast.

The coaches brought back pancakes and a 32-ounce bottle of Gatorade for each wrestler.

The weigh-ins moved slowly.

When breakfast arrived, only wrestlers up to 135 pounds had weighed in. They could eat. So could the heavier wrestlers who were not worried about making weight.

Greg Croce had not eaten dinner the night before. He had been dieting to get down to 145 pounds. He came out of the locker room after weighing in, hungry for breakfast.

Discovering that the syrup was gone, Croce sat in the bleachers, sulking, and said he would not wrestle if the coach would not feed him. He wanted eggs, at least some syrup.

The coach called the rest of the team into a locker room. They could tell he was hot.

Morina said he was tired of wrestlers complaining and talking back.

"This could be a hell of a year," he said, "but you got to pull together as a team."

Paulsboro wrestled with fury that day and again on Saturday.

Dominic Magazu, a junior with one year of experience, wrestled in Trainor's place at 130 pounds. He lost in the first round, but then won three straight consolation matches.

Senior Jeff Smith, wrestling in the 125-pound bracket and undefeated for the season, lost a match in double overtime. Paulsboro fans, 50 of whom had driven to Virginia, felt their boy had been cheated by the referee. Irma Stevenson, a Paulsboro Board of Education member, screamed: "Remember, the South lost the war!"

Still, Paulsboro had wrestled so well that it went into the finals on Saturday night with a lead large enough to win the tournament.

In the finals, Paulsboro had four head-to-head matchups with Great Bridge, a Virginia wrestling power much like Paulsboro.

Great Bridge, ranked among the top 20 schools in the nation, could not win, but it could reclaim its honor by whipping Paulsboro in the final matches.

The first match was at 119 pounds. Paulsboro's Ryan O'Hara, a junior, faced the Virginia state champion.

In the first 10 seconds, the Great Bridge wrestler shot at O'Hara for a takedown. He repeatedly took O'Hara down, almost smugly, mechanically, and then let him up just so he could take him down again and score more points. O'Hara was being hammered.

But he never quit. Twice, he scored reversals. The final score was 22-11. O'Hara was not upset after the match. "I needed it," he said. "Just to say I'm not at the top, yet."

Next up was sophomore Keros Cooper, who wrestles at 135 for Paulsboro. He is funny, friendly and good-natured, a gifted wrestler who won a regional title as a freshman.

Cooper dominated in the early rounds. He's so quick, he comes in from the side, grabs a leg, takes his man down. He's so strong, he can fight off almost any takedown attempt.

The Great Bridge wrestler clearly had been told to tie up Cooper, to hold on to his wrists, prevent him from shooting in for the takedown. The strategy neutralized Cooper.

In the first period, the two wrestlers circled the mat, almost like a dance. Neither was able to get a takedown.

The same thing happened in the second and third periods. Each wrestler scored one point, after starting a period in the bottom position and escaping.

Cooper tried one more shot with 30 seconds left in the match. It was not perfect and it left him vulnerable. The Great Bridge wrestler circled behind him and took control for two points. Cooper escaped for a point, but still could not get that last takedown, losing by 3-2.

Moments later, at 145 pounds, Croce wrestled another Great Bridge opponent. Morina did not sit in the corner to coach his wrestler. He was still angry about Croce's behavior that morning.

Croce wrestled hard. He, too, kept attacking, kept shooting for the takedown, but could not get control. The score was tied, 1-1, at the end of regulation.

In overtime, Croce continued to attack, but appeared tired. Twice he took injury time.

At the end of overtime, the Great Bridge wrestler attempted a takedown and on the edge of the out-of-bounds circle grabbed Croce's leg. As time expired, the referee gave Croce's opponent two points and the victory.

Marvin Hamilton consoled Croce in the locker room.

"I've got tears in my eyes," he said. "Everybody was rooting for you, Greg. All of us know you wrestled your ass off."

Croce, a senior, slowly looked up. "I never won this thing. This was my last chance."

Then came the fourth and final head-to-head matchup. Paulsboro's Mike Mendenhall, a junior, would battle the North Carolina state champ, who had transferred to Great Bridge.

Paulsboro's honor was at stake, and Mendenhall knew it. Betty Vogeding, a fan for 30 years, bowed her head and said a prayer.

Mendenhall is 6-foot-2, 200 pounds, wrestling in the 215-pound weight class. In football season, he weighs about 220, but works so hard at wrestling practice that his weight drops off. He is sculpted, strong and quick, a monster defensive end in football.

Mendenhall fell behind, and was trailing for most of the match. But he kept battling and was losing by 6-5 in the third period. With 30 seconds left, Mendenhall got a reversal and went ahead, 7-6.

Mendenhall needed only to hold that lead and his opponent for 25 seconds. But with 2.2 seconds left, the referee called a stalling foul on Mendenhall for the second time, awarding a point to the Great Bridge wrestler. That tied the score, 7-7, forcing overtime.

Mendenhall's eyes were slit with intensity. He circled. He came in from the side, grabbing his opponent's legs. He threw him down and took control, for two points and the victory.

Mendenhall leaped into the air, screaming, "Yes!" Teammates embraced him. He had restored Paulsboro's honor.

Moments later, Paulsboro was declared team champion. The tournament's outstanding wrestler award went to Mendenhall, a perfect ending to the evening.

The Paulsboro team boarded the bus for the ride home. It was already 10 p.m.

Coach Morina gave Mendenhall a cell phone.

Mike called his mother.

First thing he said: "Mom, I won."

At 2:45 a.m., as they rode down snowy Delaware Avenue to Paulsboro High School, Mendenhall went to the front of the bus and led his teammates in singing the school song. This is a tradition on the ride home from every match, no matter the hour, no matter the outcome.

By a mighty river deepened, with each rising tide PHS, our alma mater, stands a lasting guide. Steadfast, loyal sons and daughters, ready at thy call, Mind and heart we pledge that never shall our banner fall.

Mendenhall went home and called Breanne Donnelly, his girlfriend. It was 4 a.m. The phone rang in her room.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Want to come over?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said.

Mendenhall did not bring his trophy, but he did bring a videotape of his match. At 4:30 a.m., he and Donnelly sat in her family room eating Christmas cookies and watched the tape.

Mendenhall was not the only one who did not go home to sleep.

Coaches Morina, Duca and Mike Robostello went to Duca's house, opened the brandy, lit a fire, and talked wrestling until dawn.

V - In a flash, a season.

Apr 26, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The day before Paulsboro High School wrestled mighty Absegami High, assistant coach Steve Anuszewski pulled a small sheet of paper out of a side pocket of his sport coat. Scribbled on it was his prediction for the match.

Anuszewski had seen some of Absegami's wrestlers 30 times during their high school careers. He had scouted the Jersey Shore team three times already this season. His prediction: Paulsboro would win, 32-23.

Head coach Paul Morina did not buy it. He felt his wrestlers still were not showing enough intensity, not making enough sacrifices.

Morina wanted four key wrestlers on the team to drop to lower weight classes, where he thought they had a better chance of winning. They had refused.

Morina believed cutting weight, sacrificing for the team, was an indispensable ingredient in Paulsboro's long record of success - a winning tradition that was a great source of pride to the struggling refinery town.

As the guardian of that tradition, Morina expected and needed the sacrifice.

"I'm frustrated," he said hours before the Absegami match, on Jan. 6. "Kids have no intention of going down. They don't see the importance of going down. They're wrestling for themselves, and that's very frustrating."

Morina knew Absegami would be gunning for Paulsboro and its 59-match winning streak. The school, in Galloway Township, near Atlantic City, was the last team to beat Paulsboro in a dual meet, in January 1998. Its coach, Gene Barber, wrestled for Paulsboro in the 1960s. This year's match would be at Absegami.

"They know the most important match on their schedule is us," Morina told his team. "And they're going to be ready. It's how bad you want it. That's what it comes down to. It's on you. You represent not just this team this year, but the program, the tradition. We have everything to lose. That team has everything to gain."

Paulsboro was 3-0 in head-to-head matches this season, crushing opponents. But Absegami was a deep, powerful team ranked among the best in the state.

Barber had coached for 24 years at Absegami, a growing school with 1,800 students, and he had built a program in the Paulsboro mold.

Paulsboro's strategy was simple: Stay close in the lighter weights, win or break even in the middle weights, and score big with the heavier guys.

David Smith, the Paulsboro freshman wrestling at 103, had the flu, but valiantly did his job, losing but avoiding a pin. The victory gave Absegami four points. Howard Lounsberry, another Paulsboro freshman, was beaten by 15 points, a "technical fall" worth five points to Absegami.

One of the key matchups of the afternoon was between Paulsboro's Ryan O'Hara and Absegami's Ryan Bridge in the 119-pound weight class. O'Hara had beaten Bridge in a head-to-head bout last year, but then lost to him at the

regional tournament. Paulsboro assistant coaches feared that Bridge was too strong for O'Hara, which is why they had wanted O'Hara to drop to 112 pounds.

From the outset, Bridge attacked, controlling the bout. O'Hara could not fend off Bridge's takedowns and lost by a point, 8-7.

Then senior Jeff Smith pinned his opponent in the 125-pound slot – a huge win for Paulsboro. The pin was worth six points, so Absegami held a modest lead after four bouts, 12-6.

The next Paulsboro wrestler should have been senior Pat Trainor. He had quit the team before Christmas, tired of the sport. His coaches, relatives and teammates urged him to reconsider. Finally, Trainor said he would rejoin the team after the holidays.

On Jan. 2, the first day back to school, Trainor was awake at 5 a.m. His mother heard him rustling around in his room. "I couldn't sleep," Trainor said later. "I was thinking I had to come back that day. I was thinking I really didn't want to go through all of that stuff again - losing the weight, going to practices."

He did not go to practice that day, or the next, or ever again. His teammates faced Absegami without him.

One of Absegami's best wrestlers, Dave Chapman, normally competes at 130. But Absegami took a gamble. Because Trainor was gone, it saved Chapman to wrestle at 135 against Keros Cooper, one of Paulsboro's stars.

Trainor's replacement, junior Dominic Magazu, came from behind against Absegami's Kevin Callender, with a takedown in the last 30 seconds, and won by two points.

Next, Chapman faced Cooper in a battle between defending region champs. Chapman owned Cooper, 7-1. Then Trevor Suter, Paulsboro's freshman at 140 pounds, lost, 13-8.

The team score was now 18-9, in favor of Absegami.

Up next was senior Greg Croce. Croce was key.

Greg Croce was a remarkable athlete. At age 12, he struck out all 18 batters in a six-inning Little League game. Soccer was his favorite sport. But he gave up all others for wrestling.

In Croce's freshman year, Paulsboro fans predicted he would one day win a state championship. His match that year against Sterling's Mark Manchio is legendary in Paulsboro. Manchio came in highly celebrated and undefeated. Croce dismantled him, 12-6. Manchio ended up losing only twice in his high school career and won three state championships.

Despite Croce's accomplishments - nearly 100 high school wins, including some big victories in critical matches - the coaches were disappointed in him. With his talent, they thought he should do better, be a state champion. They felt he was not dedicated enough and that he could be a distraction to the team.

Croce believed he often did not get the credit he deserved. During one practice over Christmas break, running the halls to build endurance, Croce said: "I've been running these same halls since I was 5. I've worked harder than anybody on this team all my life. That's how I got so good."

Even though his knee bothered him all the previous season, and he had surgery in June, Croce had set a Paulsboro season record for takedowns.

Croce's mother, Elaine, has heard what people in town say about her son, about other Paulsboro wrestlers. "They're critiqued like they're million-dollar athletes," she said.

Croce, despite all the grief he gets, thinks he would be a good wrestling coach and has joked that one day maybe he would coach Paul Morina's three young sons.

Children love him. Their faces light up in the wrestling room when he rolls around with them on the mats. When alumni or fans bring babies to matches, they often wind up on Croce's lap.

Steve Anuszewski and many Paulsboro fans figured Croce would beat Absegami's Ray Weed. But they knew it would not be easy. Both wrestlers were seniors, and both were superb. Still, Croce had always won the big matches.

From the opening whistle, Croce had his way with Weed, trapping him on his back and racking up points. Tommy Sampson, Keros Cooper's dad, was screaming: "Give me some blades, Greg. I need some blades!" He was referring, of course, to shoulder blades. He wanted Croce to pin.

In the third period, Croce was ahead by 9-2. With a minute to go, the wrestlers rolled out of bounds. As Croce headed back into the middle of the circle, Morina cautioned him: "No big moves." Protect his lead.

But with 54 seconds left, Weed surprised Croce with a move known as a neck-wrench and trapped Croce on his back.

Croce was nearly out of bounds. But Weed dragged him back inside the in-bounds circle.

And pinned him.

In 101 varsity matches, Greg Croce had never been pinned.

Instead of picking up three points for his team, cutting Absegami's lead to 18-12, Croce gave up six. Absegami was ahead, 24-9.

Things only got worse.

Preston Paulsen was pinned, in the 152-pound bout. Tommy Giorgianni lost at 160, making the score 33-9 with four matches to go.

The team did pick up big points - including a pin, a forfeit, and a major decision - but it was not enough.

Final score: 33-28. After 59 matches, the winning streak was broken.

Morina walked over to his father, Babe, and shook his head. That night, for the first time, Morina thought about giving up coaching after the season. Maybe his time had passed.

As the Paulsboro team walked out of the gym, heading to the bus, Croce went over to Alice Kamman, 79, a lifelong fan, and took her hand. "It made me feel like he was saying, 'I'm sorry,' " Kamman said. "I just squeezed his hand. I couldn't say anything because I was filled up."

After the bus ride home, Morina gathered the team in the Paulsboro locker room: "I think the team that was hungrier won the match," he said. Morina did not raise his voice. He seemed calm, the pressure off. The chance to be No. 1 in New Jersey was gone, at least for now.

"We wrestled good in spots," he said. He saluted Magazu. "That kid pinned you in 23 seconds last year," Morina said, smiling broadly. "You sucked it up again. That is a bright star, and that is what I'm looking for in everybody."

He paused.

"High school wrestling is not the biggest thing that's going to happen in your life," Morina said. "It's the effort you put into working together as a team that is important here. I don't know how many guys cared about winning this as a team. You expected to win because we're Paulsboro. Because we haven't lost in two years.

"I question this team. How much you care. I want kids that are going to care. For the first time in my coaching career, it doesn't surprise me that we lost. It doesn't surprise me because we lost the way we practice.

"We start over tomorrow, at noon," he said. "Be on time. We're gonna run."

In the days that followed, Morina believed that Absegami might have been a turning point for Croce.

A few days after the defeat, Morina gave him a ride home from practice. Croce sat in the front of Morina's truck. He did not say much. Finally, Croce broke the silence.

"I lost the match for us, didn't I?"

"Nah," the coach said. "You didn't help. But no one guy loses the match. Lots of kids didn't wrestle well and nobody made the sacrifices. You made a mistake. You live with that."

That same week Croce pinned a Delsea High School wrestler in the first period. Then, at practice, Morina challenged Croce to a race in the hallway.

Morina is 42 years old, 200 pounds, with a bum hip. Croce is a high school senior, 145 pounds, lightning quick.

The team watched, aware of the chemistry. Morina hurled himself down the hall, in a losing effort. He wanted to show Croce that he was giving this sprint all he had, that Croce still mattered to him.

Greg knew this. He was still on Morina's radar.

VI - On a roll, but not without sacrifices

Apr 27, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

After the loss to archrival Absegami High School, the mood among the Paulsboro wrestlers seemed to lift, as though the pressure were off. After 59 consecutive victories, the team had finally lost.

Yet the defeat also shook the team, shook it so much that wrestlers finally began to do the things coach Paul Morina had been asking them to do all season.

They began to cut weight, to drop to lower weight classes so that Morina could juggle the lineup to get the best matchups against opposing teams.

Cutting weight was a time-honored tradition at the South Jersey high school. Morina had done it when he was a Paulsboro wrestler in the 1970s. To him, it was more than a tactic, a way to get an edge. It was a sign of character, of willingness to sacrifice for the team, the school, the community.

Yet today's wrestlers were not as willing to drop weight. There were health worries and an abundance of temptations. Early in the season, several wrestlers had refused the coach's entreaties to shed pounds.

After the Absegami defeat, and with an important match looming against Swedesboro's Kingsway Regional High School, they had reconsidered.

Keros Cooper, the 135-pounder, dropped to 130. He was so hungry that when a commercial came on the car radio for the International House of Pancakes one afternoon, he lunged from the back seat and changed the station.

Ryan O'Hara, a junior, agreed to go down to 112, from 119.

"Truthfully, I was sick of hearing him," he said, referring to Morina.

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At 4:30 on Jan. 20, the afternoon of the Kingsway match, a line of fans stretched down the hallway waiting to get into the Paulsboro gym. Morina, in shirt and tie, criss-crossed the mat with a mop, disinfecting.

By 5 p.m., two hours before the start of the Saturday match, the gym held 1,000 fans - a sellout. Fans were standing in doorways, crowding behind both benches, squeezing into the bleachers.

Weigh-ins were in the locker room. Five Paulsboro wrestlers had dropped to lower weight classes for the match. O'Hara's legs, normally muscular, seemed birdlike. Cooper, who at 135 looked sculpted, seemed skinny at 130.

O'Hara stepped on to the scale slowly, softly. Be kind to the scale, many wrestlers say, and it will be kind to you.

The scale was kind to O'Hara. After weighing in at 112 in his underwear, he stepped off, put on his socks and sweats, and headed back to his locker, where he took a swig from a bottle of water.

O'Hara then drank 20 ounces of Gatorade. He opened a little travel cooler, sat on the floor in front of his locker, and began to eat: first, a triple-decker peanut butter sandwich, consuming it in four bites; then a granola bar; then a banana.

Cooper sat a few lockers away, eating from a box of graham crackers, squirting honey generously on top. He was chattering, euphoric. He was eating.

Wrestlers are allowed to eat and drink after they weigh in.

Moments later, Morina gathered the team in the wrestling room. He saluted the wrestlers who had cut weight.

"This is what we didn't have a few weeks ago at Absegami. We have it now. We're a stronger team. The bulls- is over.

"These are the matches you remember all your life," Morina said. "The gym is packed. Packed. The intensity is up. This is the fun part of wrestling. These are the matches we perform best in."

He paused and then sought to provide another source of motivation for his wrestlers.

"When you walk into that gym, look at how many people out there are in black [Kingsway's color] that used to be from Paulsboro . . . They don't want to live in a town anymore with boarded-up windows. This school was not good enough

for them. This place was not good enough for them. That's how I feel. If you're not staying here in this town, fighting for our kids, then you ain't for Paulsboro.

"These people are trying to take our pride from our town, our tradition, and put it at another school. That's what they're doing. And they're doing a pretty good job.

"You take it to them."

At one time, many communities fed Paulsboro High School, which once had more than 1,100 students.

But as surrounding towns grew and built their own schools, Paulsboro's enrollment dropped. Many families moved to adjacent Gibbstown, a modest river town that still sends students to Paulsboro High. Sixteen of 33 wrestlers on the Paulsboro team live in Gibbstown. So do Paulsboro assistant coaches Dean Duca and Carmel Morina.

Paul Morina, however, would never live in Gibbstown, or anywhere other than Paulsboro. He believes that Paulsboro wrestlers, who tend to be less well-off, are tougher, hungrier.

When Paul Morina gets angry at his brother Carmel, he yells at him: "Go on back to the promised land."

When the Kingsway match began, the small, 80-year-old gym rocked. The referee could not hear the buzzer signaling the end of a period because of the din, so a boy with a rolled-up towel stood beside the ref, tossing it in his view when time expired.

O'Hara was prepared to wrestle at 112, but at the last minute Paulsboro coaches sent out freshman Howard Lounsberry. O'Hara wrestled at 119 after all.

The coaches wanted to win at least one of the two matches. They thought their best chance was in pitting O'Hara against Kingsway's 119-pounder, Joe Leone, a freshman.

Lounsberry was pinned.

O'Hara, giving up seven pounds to his opponent, quickly fell behind, 6-1. Leone knew that he was heavier and kept attacking, going for the takedown.

Steve Anuszewski, the Paulsboro assistant who makes lineup changes, looked nervous.

Dawn O'Hara looked worse.

The only thing harder than being a wrestler is being a wrestler's mother.

Ryan O'Hara first pestered his mother to wrestle at age 4. For five years, she refused, hoping he would get interested in something else.

"He begged and pleaded, year after year," she recalled. "I wouldn't go for it for so long. I was afraid of him getting hurt. Finally, when he was 9, I gave in."

One night in March 2000, the phone rang. It was her husband, Jack, calling from Atlantic City Medical Center. An opponent had fallen on Ryan as he wrestled in the regional tournament, breaking Ryan's jaw.

O'Hara had surgery. His jaw was wired shut.

He looked pitiful. He survived on Ensure and milkshakes.

O'Hara could not wrestle for eight months. Instead, he lifted weights, built his strength back. Last summer, he made a poster and hung it on the ceiling above his bed: "Ryan O'Hara, state champion, 119 pounds." That's what he stared at, dreamed about, every night before going to bed.

With Ryan down, 6-1, Dawn O'Hara buried her head in her hands. To watch Ryan lose the weight, then to see him struggle on the mat, was more than she could endure.

O'Hara closed the score to 6-5 in the third period. His mother peeked out beneath the fingers covering her face. She wanted to leave, but her older son, Keith, urged her to stay.

With 15 seconds left in the third and final period, the referee called stalling on Kingsway's Leone for the second time, awarding a point to O'Hara - tying the match at 6.

O'Hara was having trouble breathing because of asthma. His stomach was cramping.

Paulsboro was behind, 10-0, a bad beginning but hardly insurmountable. O'Hara felt he had let the team down when he lost against Absegami, two weeks earlier. He could not let it happen again.

In overtime, Leone attacked and got O'Hara's legs. But O'Hara tied him up and they drifted out of bounds.

O'Hara attacked at the referee's whistle. He grabbed his opponent's arm just above the elbow, dragged it forward with a snap, and quickly circled in behind the boy to gain control. It was his favorite move.

The referee signaled two points, and the match was over.

Ryan O'Hara, 112 pounds before the banana and peanut butter and Gatorade, raised both hands in joy.

But that moment quickly passed. O'Hara stumbled off the mat and collapsed behind the bench.

Teammate Mike Rastelli, who had had a lifetime of ailments since he was born weighing two pounds 17 years earlier, kneeled beside O'Hara, yelled above the crowd noise into his ear: "Ry, do you need an ambulance?" Rastelli knew O'Hara had asthma.

O'Hara waved him off. He just needed time to recover.

Jack O'Hara rushed over to Ryan, making sure his son was OK. Then he told him: "You're never doing that again!"

Meaning, of course, that Ryan would never drop to 112 again.

O'Hara's victory kick-started the team. Paulsboro went on to win, 31-21.

Cooper, who had cut weight to 130, ended up wrestling in the 135-pound weight class. He looked enervated and mortal, winning by 6-4 in what was not expected to be a close match.

Tommy Giorgianni, who had dropped from 160 pounds to 152, as Morina had been asking him to do all season, wrestled at the lower weight and beat a tough opponent, 10-4.

In the locker room, Morina congratulated his team and singled out O'Hara. "Ryan, you suck down to 112, you wrestle 119, you fell behind, sucked it up. . . . The guys who lost weight picked it up in the third period, especially your match, Ryan. You were killing him.

"Look at the people who made sacrifices for the team. I know I'm going to take heat for it. It might not make sense to some people, but the thing is, we're trying to put the best people out there and get the best matchups. The bottom line, you guys pulled together as a team tonight."

For the next two weeks, Paulsboro romped. It shut out Haddon Heights. Its last three wrestlers - James Funk, Mike Mendenhall and Tom Curl - were a combined 57-0 for the season. The team's record was 13-1.

Next up was Audubon, on Feb. 7. At stake was Paulsboro's most coveted streak. The Red Raiders had not lost to a team in South Jersey's Colonial Conference for 29 seasons. A win on this night would make it 30.

Audubon was formidable. Like Paulsboro, it had only one defeat all season - to Absegami.

Before the match, the Paulsboro wrestlers were pumped. Metallica helped.

Wrestlers lined up at the locker room door, ready to explode on the mat in front of the home crowd.

"Thirty years on the line, fellas, 30 years," Morina said. "Six hard minutes."

Paulsboro was nearly perfect, winning, 61-3. The night belonged to Lounsberry, a freshman who at the beginning of the season did not dare dream of wrestling varsity.

With only one year of experience, Lounsberry knew so little, but wanted it so much. He worked hard, ran on his own every night after practice.

Morina and his staff will take boys like Lounsberry, wrestlers with little skill but immense desire, and turn them into above-average wrestlers, sometimes even great wrestlers. Lounsberry, whose record was 6-13, had been improving all season.

Teammate David Smith had lost at 103. Paulsboro was behind, 3-0. Lounsberry scrapped. He fought off his back in the first period.

In the third period, he pinned his opponent.

Lounsberry ended the evening being interviewed by a local newspaper reporter in the locker room. He could not stop grinning.

VII - Duel with a state power brings shot at redemption

Apr 28, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The climax of the year for Paulsboro High School, the match that coach Paul Morina and his team had waited for, was the regular-season finale: Phillipsburg.

The team from northwest New Jersey is a powerhouse in the same class as Paulsboro. Over the years, its wrestlers had won 32 individual state titles, compared with 19 for Paulsboro.

Entering the 2000-01 season, Phillipsburg had won the state Group 4 team title in 13 of the previous 18 years, compared with 18 straight Group 1 titles for smaller Paulsboro.

Phillipsburg head coaches Greg Troxell and Kevin Kane are former state champions who returned to their alma mater. The fan base is immense and loyal; 750 season passes are sold for home matches. Visiting fans scrap for seats in the corners.

Because Phillipsburg has 1,400 students and is located 70 miles north, across the Delaware River from Easton, Pa., the two schools would not ordinarily meet during the regular season.

But Paul Morina is a purist. He loves great wrestling. He agreed four years ago to put Phillipsburg on the schedule, the last match of the regular season.

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The first battle, in 1999, was probably the greatest moment in the history of Paulsboro wrestling . Paulsboro traveled to Phillipsburg that year. Both teams were undefeated in New Jersey.

When Paulsboro arrived, the Red Raiders found every window in the gym covered with black paper, an act of intimidation.

Paulsboro won only six of 14 bouts that day. But four came by pin, worth 24 points. None of the eight who lost surrendered a pin.

In the final bout, at heavyweight, with Paulsboro holding a four-point lead, Tom Curl, then a freshman, was sent out not to win - but to avoid a pin.

He did as he was told and gave up three points for a decision. Paulsboro won the match by a point.

Police cars and fire trucks met the team bus as it pulled off Interstate 295, and led the wrestlers on a parade through Paulsboro and Gibbstown. Doors opened, people waved and screamed. Paulsboro pride.

The next year, it was almost the same thing. Both teams were unbeaten in New Jersey. Phillipsburg came to Paulsboro. Again, Paulsboro won by a point.

This year, on Feb. 10, Paulsboro went back to Phillipsburg, where they were selling T-shirts that said: "The UnCivil War: North Versus South."

Morina was surprisingly relaxed. His team had its two best practices of the year in the previous two days. He saw intensity, fire. And three wrestlers had dropped down a weight class, enabling coaches to juggle the lineup to get the best matchups.

The first bout set the tone for the day. Dave Smith wrestled at the 103-pound weight class, and got a takedown and a two-point lead. He and his opponent wrestled back and forth, tight and tough. With 40 seconds left, Smith was behind, 4-3. He was on the bottom and escaped, getting one point and a tie score.

Each 103-pounder tried a takedown in overtime, but the other fought it off. Smith seemed to have one, finally, but the referee would not call it, would not give him the two points and the victory, because Smith did not have clear control. In a flash, the Phillipsburg boy rolled over on Smith and suddenly he had the takedown and the win.

Howard Lounsberry wrestled next for Paulsboro. Just three days before, he had pinned his man, igniting the team against Camden County's Audubon High. His mission here was to stay off his back, not to give up six points. He failed. Phillipsburg was up by 9-0.

Now it was up to Ryan O'Hara, as it often was, to get Paulsboro's first win.

O'Hara started out sluggishly, which this season had not been uncommon for him. His opponent took him down for a 2-0 lead. But as the first period ended, O'Hara scored a reversal and put his opponent on his back for a 4-2 lead.

In the second period, O'Hara twice rolled across his back, trying a move. He rolled a third time and his opponent threw a move known as a "cement mixer." O'Hara ended up on his back, in a headlock.

For the first time all season, O'Hara got pinned.

Phillipsburg led, 15-0.

Wrestling is a sport of emotion, attitude, desire. Phillipsburg had never lost to any team in New Jersey three times in a row. Now its fans felt the momentum building.

Jeff Smith headed out to the mat for the 125-pound bout. Even though he was in his first year at Paulsboro, a transfer from Washington Township, Smith was in many ways the quintessential Paulsboro wrestler. Nobody started a bout more aggressively, went after opponents as ferociously, worked harder in practice.

Smith ran wind sprints on his own, in the wrestling room, after everyone else was done. At the beginning of the season, Smith said he missed his old school and old friends. But a few days before Phillipsburg, as the season was ending, the senior said: "I wish I had another year here."

But Smith did not attack with his usual zeal. Instead of trying for the six-point pin, he wrestled cautiously for the win.

Phillipsburg 15, Paulsboro 3.

Keros Cooper, wrestling down a weight class at 130 pounds, pinned his man in 49 seconds. The score was 15-9.

There was still hope.

Next came freshman Trevor Suter. He had also dropped a weight class, to wrestle at 135 pounds.

He battled. He bled. Suter was up, 4-2, late in the third period. He was on top, struggling to keep his opponent under control. Out of nowhere, it seemed to Suter and his teammates, he was hit with a second stalling call with 15 seconds left in the six-minute match. That gave his opponent a point, making it 4-3.

Suter could not afford to let the man up, because allowing an escape, worth a point, would tie the score at 4. He had to hold his opponent down for another 15 seconds. Six hard minutes. He had to hold on.

He could not. At the last second, the Phillipsburg wrestler scored a reversal, getting two points and the 5-4 win. His team went ahead, 18-9.

Because Cooper and Suter had dropped weight classes, there was a vacancy at Suter's usual spot, 140.

Assistant coach Steve Anuszewski drafted a junior varsity wrestler, Steve O'Leary, who had dropped from 152 pounds to 140.

O'Leary wrestled with heart, but, at the end of the second period, succumbed. He was pinned.

Phillipsburg now led by 24-9.

Senior Greg Croce, the 145-pounder, was next. A month earlier, at Absegami High School, Croce had been pinned for the first time in his career. Absegami won the match, ending Paulsboro's 59-match winning streak. Many fans held Croce responsible.

Croce had wrestled extremely well ever since and been a model in the practice room. He had won 11 straight, six by pin. Just three days earlier, against Audubon, Croce had wrestled an opponent who was set to become the all-time winningest wrestler in Audubon history. The team had brought a plaque to Paulsboro and was ready to give it to him that night. Audubon had to wait. Croce dominated.

Croce had always been a riddle to his coaches. They worshiped his talent but questioned his desire. They saw him as key to the team's success - if only they could find a way to motivate him. Lately, he had regained their respect with his performance on the mat and in practice.

A telling moment had come before the Haddonfield match the previous week. A yearbook photographer was there to take the team picture. The photographer also wanted a shot of the team captains. Morina had designated Tom Curl, Mike Mendenhall and Jeff Smith as captains.

But as the three boys lined up, Morina said: "Tommy, get in there," and motioned to Tommy Giorgianni, a senior, to join the group.

And then: "You too, Croce."

If Paulsboro had any hope against Phillipsburg, it needed help from Croce.

He put on a clinic.

After the second period, the score was 7-1. As the third period was about to start, Morina yelled: "Greg!" Croce looked over. The coach put a finger to the side of his head, to indicate that Croce should use his head. "Be smart," Morina yelled. He did not want Croce to get caught in a careless move, as he had at Absegami.

Croce won, 10-3.

The team score was 24-12.

Next up, at 152, was Giorgianni, who had been wrestling since he was 4. Giorgianni has a bulging disk in his back and goes to a chiropractor three times a week. He went twice the day before.

Giorgianni fell behind, 5-0, battled to 6-5, but faded and lost by 9-5.

Paulsboro was in serious trouble, 27-12.

Zach Garren went out to wrestle at 160. Garren, a sophomore, had wrestled at 171 for much of the season, even though coaches all along wanted him at 160.

Garren resisted pressure to lose the weight. But then, in late January, he got sick and lost five pounds. He decided finally to drop to 160. He was halfway there. His parents didn't object because he could still eat three meals a day.

He won, 3-1.

The team score was 27-15 with four bouts left.

At 171 pounds, Paulsboro's Isaac Redman had maybe the hardest opponent of all, Dale Rissmiller, undefeated in 23 bouts.

Down in the third period, Redman came back. He got a takedown to lead by a point. He showed his heart, his ability, and his lack of wind. Exhausted, he gave up a takedown and lost by a point.

Phillipsburg led, 30-15.

In the next two bouts, Mike Mendenhall and James Funk switched spots. Both were undefeated. But coaches felt Mendenhall, who weighed 200 and normally wrestled in the 215-pound class, would match up better in the 189-pound class.

He had lost the weight during the week, and he won the bout.

The team score was 30-18 with two bouts left. Two pins would tie the score. A tie was better than a loss.

Funk had to pin. He had to pick up six team points. Everyone knew that heavyweight Tom Curl could pin his opponent for another six.

Funk put his opponent on his back several times. But the Phillipsburg wrestler, easily 20 pounds heavier, fought off a pin. Funk won by 14 points, picking up four for the team, but it didn't matter. Phillipsburg's lead was insurmountable, so it forfeited the heavyweight match to Curl.

Phillipsburg prevailed, 30-28.

The bus ride home was quiet. O'Hara lay his head against the window, stared blankly outside, or closed his eyes. Coaches rehashed the afternoon.

Later, Morina gathered the team in the Paulsboro locker room. It was 7 p.m.

"I'm not disappointed in your effort," he said. "We're all disappointed in the outcome. You guys are winners."

The dual-meet regular season was over. But they still had the Group 1 team tournament the following week, the chance to be best in the state among schools their size.

And in the weeks after came the district, regional, and state tournaments, chances for individual glory.

Morina tried to end on a positive note, with a love of wrestling.

"Tell me that wasn't a great atmosphere," he said, smiling. "That's what it's all about."

VIII - Among champions, a heavyweight wins the ultimate prize

Apr 29, 2001

By Michael Vitez INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Tommy Curl began wrestling at age 4. His father said the boy started because he liked the uniforms.

He wrestled all over South Jersey at first, then up and down the East Coast, and eventually nationwide.

Tommy and his dad and other Paulsboro wrestlers and their dads would pile into a station wagon and drive to tournaments. They slept eight to a hotel room. Parents in beds, boys on the floor.

When Curl was 9, he and his dad flew to St. Louis for a national tournament. Wrestling at 75 pounds, Tommy Curl won.

Ever since, Paulsboro fans expected great things from Curl. As a freshman, he finished fifth in the state. As a sophomore, he finished third.

Now a junior, a 255-pound heavyweight, Curl had legs like Roman pillars, a chest as broad as a billboard. Yet he still wrestled like a 75-pounder, so quick, so fluid. He loved the sport for its simplicity: "You don't rely on anybody but yourself."

Before the season started, the Paulsboro faithful assumed that Curl would win a state championship.

More than that: They were relying on him.

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By mid-February, the dual meets - head-to-head contests against individual schools - were complete. Paulsboro had finished 18-2, had won its 19th straight state championship for small high schools, and was ranked fourth in the state overall. For most schools, that would be a huge success. In wrestling-proud Paulsboro, it was a disappointment.

In the last week of February and the first weeks of March, individual Paulsboro wrestlers competed for district, region and state titles. This was an opportunity for redemption - one last chance to show that Paulsboro was still dominant.

Howard Lounsberry, a freshman, was seeded fifth at 112 pounds at the district tournament, held at Gloucester County College. He had come into the season with little experience. His record was 11-14, but he had improved steadily.

He scored an upset win in the first round, then lost in the next round. Still, he had a chance to finish third and move on to the regional tournament if he won in the consolation round. His opponent was 19-5.

Lounsberry came out pumped. He fell behind right away, but pulled himself together. In the second period, losing by three points, he scored a reversal, threw his opponent on his back, and pinned him.

Coach Paul Morina was gleeful. Here was a boy who had come from nowhere.

Lounsberry was up, screaming, dancing: "I'm going to regionals, I'm going to regionals."

Tony Chila, an assistant coach, told Lounsberry to take a "walk-by" in front of the bleachers where 300 to 400 Paulsboro fans sat, a burst of red. He did as he was told.

The fans saw him and began to cheer and stomp.

Lounsberry beamed. He had sacrificed for his team, school and town, and they loved him for it.

Pat Trainor, a senior who had quit the team two months earlier, came to watch some of his old teammates. He had wrestled at 130. He now weighed 150. At first, walking into the gym, he said he did not miss the sport, did not regret having quit.

But as he watched the 130-pound district final - what might have been his final- he felt a pang. "Nothing matches this," he said.

After winning his district semifinal bout, Greg Croce, a senior, was honored for earning his 100th high school win. As he was leaving the mat, Paulsboro fans stood and cheered.

Croce betrayed no emotion, but took a long look at the crowd.

His friend Lynnielle Redman brought him a bouquet of Mylar balloons.

Other girls came, too, with cards, hugs. Croce sat on the floor, against the gym wall, in silence, opened his cards, and read them slowly.

Tommy Giorgianni and Zach Garren - having dropped to lower weight classes at Morina's request - won their first district titles.

The regional tournament was a week later at Absegami High School in Galloway Township, where Paulsboro had suffered a heartbreaking defeat eight weeks earlier, ending its 59-match winning streak.

Paulsboro wrestlers had something to prove - none more than Croce, who wanted to win a regional title and get his name on the board among other regional champs back in the Paulsboro wrestling room.

Croce was 19-0 since he and his team had lost in this gym in January. His first match in the regionals, at 145 pounds, was Friday night, March 2.

The day before, he got the flu. He vomited and barely slept.

"He'll get through on heart," Elaine Croce said of her son.

He did. He went ahead, 11-5, but faded in the second period, giving up a reversal. With a burst, Croce threw his opponent on his back and pinned him.

His next match was 10 a.m. Saturday. He had about 12 hours to get better.

The next morning, Croce still looked pale. His semifinal opponent was Jared Villecco of Kingsway High School in Swedesboro. Even were Croce well, Villecco would be formidable.

Croce managed a takedown and two points. Then he cut Villecco loose. Villecco took Croce down and put him on his back.

Croce's mother left the gym and smoked a cigarette.

In the third period, Croce fell behind by 8-4.

As the last seconds ticked away, it became clear that he would not win a regional championship, that his name would not be on that wall in the wrestling room after all.

The buzzer sounded. Croce lay on the mat, spent. He got up, shook his opponent's hand, and walked slowly behind the bench, where he fell to his hands and knees and threw up into a bucket.

Tom Curl dominated the district tournament, the region tournament, and the first two rounds of the states. He did it with relentless efficiency, registering seven consecutive pins.

That was how he had wrestled all year. Going into the heavyweight state final, Curl had won 33 matches this season - 21 by pin. He had lost once - in double overtime - to Chris Knapp of Bound Brook, the wrestler everyone expected Curl to meet again in the state final.

Eight times, opponents had forfeited to Curl rather than face him. His matches lasted an average of 1 minute, 57 seconds. His father was Paulsboro's most patient parent. Always, his son wrestled last, and often he wrestled only briefly - not that Tom Curl Sr. ever complained about that.

At the state championships in the Continental Airlines Arena in the North Jersey Meadowlands, Curl won his third match, the semifinal, 4-0.

That put him in the final against Knapp.

This would be the fifth time in three years that the two had faced each other. Curl had won the first two bouts, Knapp the next two.

In his loss to Knapp on Feb. 17, Curl had been ahead by 5-2 in the third period. But he stopped attacking and wrestled conservatively. Curl had been furious with himself afterward.

Before Curl walked onto the mat for the championship match, around 7 on Sunday night, March 11, in front of 10,000 fans and a cable television audience, Morina gave him one last pep talk.

"Get mean," the coach said. "You're a nice kid, but right now you've got to get mean!"

Morina also told Curl to attack. Morina told Curl he could live with the outcome, win or lose, as long as Curl gave everything he had.

Six hard minutes.

Up in the stands, the Paulsboro fans were silent.

They were almost afraid to hope.

Forty-nine seconds into the match, Curl shot for a takedown, got it, and went ahead, 2-0.

In the first two periods, he took Knapp down twice more, once onto his back, pushing the score to 9-2.

Tom Curl Sr. sat quietly, rubbing his chin. He had driven his son tens of thousands of miles and watched him wrestle nearly 1,000 matches over the years.

Teammate Mike Rastelli had his hands folded, as if in prayer.

Morina and assistant coach Dean Duca were each on one knee, shouting advice from the sideline, hoarse.

The second period ended with Curl ahead by 9-3.

Mike Rastelli's mother yelled: "Two minutes, Tommy Curl. Two minutes."

Curl began the third period with an escape from the bottom position, gaining a point, 10-3. But then Knapp took him down, and for the first time all evening, all tournament, Curl struggled.

The Paulsboro fans fell silent.

Not again.

Curl fought his way up and out, scoring an escape and another point. The score was 11-5.

As Morina had told him, Curl stayed aggressive. Even with the lead, he lunged for a takedown with three seconds left.

The buzzer sounded.

Tom Curl was state champ.

He leaped to his feet, thrust both arms into the air. Tears poured down his face.

He ran over to his coaches.

"Thank you," he said, hugging them. "Thank you."

His father, a retired bricklayer who suffers from degenerative arthritis, walked carefully down to the arena floor to greet his son, who had rushed a different route up into the stands to hug his dad.

They finally met in the first row. Father and son were still crying. Both felt relief as much as joy. The pressure had been so great.

"Ever since I was little, this has always been a dream," the son said.

On a Saturday night two weeks later, the fans held a party for Tom Curl and three other wrestlers at the Sons of Italy lodge in Paulsboro.

Paulsboro had more top place-winners at the states than any other team. Mike Mendenhall finished third at 215 pounds, Jeff Smith fifth at 125, and James Funk sixth at 189.

Funk had fractured his fibula in the quarterfinals, wrestled on one leg, and won - before going to the emergency room. He wanted to wrestle in the semis, the next morning, but Morina would not let him.

"I wanted him to end the season on a positive note," Morina said at the party. "A lot of other coaches came up to me afterward and said only a Paulsboro wrestler could have done that."

Morina was a different man now. He was relaxed, playful, happy. The season was over, the stress was gone.

Morina said he would return for another year as coach, and he had already begun thinking about next season, practicing with the junior-high wrestlers after school, taking them to tournaments on weekends.

In an annual ritual, Morina flew to Iowa with several assistant coaches for the national college tournament. This is bliss. Each year, they watch wrestling all day and evening, and at night, back in their shared hotel room, they push the beds out of the way. And wrestle.

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About This Series

For five months, reporter Michael Vitez and photographer Ron Cortes followed the state champion Paulsboro wrestling team. From before the

first practice in November through the last match in March, they enjoyed unusual access to wrestlers, coaches, families and fans. Six Hard Minutes, the resulting eight-part series, explores the special bond between the wrestling program and the town and recounts the struggles and triumphs of the season.