

WRESTLING: A KOVALICK FAMILY LEGACY

By Bill Welker

There are very few families in the Ohio Valley whose name is synonymous with the sport of wrestling as much as the Kovalick Family. And the late coaching legend and OVAC Hall of Famer, George Kovalick, was the patriarch.

Starting with little knowledge of wrestling, Coach Kovalick, who was an outstanding athlete at Bridgeport High School and Kent State University, became a student of the mat sport, reading anything he could get his hands on about wrestling. He would search for anyone and everyone who was involved with wrestling in the early 1950s, which included picking the minds of Bill McEldowney of the Wheeling YMCA and the legendary Pitt coach, Rex Peery.

In the fall of 1953, Coach Kovalick set up a meeting with the late John “Corky” Vrotsos and the late Bill Van Horne at Dutch Henry’s in Martins Ferry. They laid the groundwork for the first OVAC Wrestling Tournament (now the Ron Mauck OVAC Wrestling Tournament), which was held in 1954 at the old Bridgeport High School gymnasium on Bennett Street. Thus, the beginning of the Coach Kovalick and family wrestling dynasty.

George Kovalick was a “master-organizer” with attention to detail in every aspect of the mat sport. As with all athletic events, he was a true believer in the “basics” (aka the fundamentals or essentials). Furthermore, Kovalick was from the “old school.” He was a strict disciplinarian at practice and during the rigors of competition. But Kovalick was also a head of his time in that he was a very passionate proponent of equal rights for all human beings, denouncing racism and

bigotry in any form.

As the Bridgeport High School wrestling coach, George Kovalick directed the “Bulldog” wrestlers to 7 OVAC Wrestling Championships in a row, from 1954 until 1960. But it doesn’t end there. During that time, the Bridgeport mat men placed second in the 1955 Ohio State Wrestling Championships to Bedford, Ohio. And in 1959, the Bridgeport “Bulldogs” hit the jackpot, winning the Ohio State Wrestling Championship, outlasting perennial mat-sport power at that time, Maple Heights, coached by another Ohio legendary coach, Mike Milkovich.

What is totally amazing regarding this feat, little Bridgeport High School won the coveted state championship trophy at a time when there was just one wrestling division in Ohio. Furthermore, his “Bulldog” teams placed in the top 10 at seven state championship tournaments.

Also, quite impressive, Coach Kovalick produced seven Ohio state champions during his tenure at Bridgeport High School: Bobby Douglas (1959 & 1961), Art Hehr (1958 & 1959), Gerald Lattocha (1956), Walt Tolarchyk (1959), and Frank Cunningham (1960). During his tenure at Bridgeport High School, Coach Kovalick also produced a total of 25 all-state wrestlers, which included: John Porter (3rd), Dave Smith (4th), Bill Floyd (3rd), M. Christy (3rd), Ben Hehr (4th), Ron Taylor (4th / 3rd), Bill Floyd (4th), Ed Gretz (3rd), Don Delande (4th), Tom Evans (2nd), Art Hehr (3rd), Loren Laiffle (4th), Frank Cunningham (2nd), Bobby Douglas (3rd), Walt Tolarchyk (2nd), Harry Sommers (3rd), and Ted Wierzbicki (3rd).

After his stint at Bridgeport High School, Coach Kovalick took on the reins as head wrestling coach at West Liberty State College. As always, he produced

winning teams on the “Hilltopper” mats. His protégé, Olympian (1964 – 1968) Bobby Douglas, not only was a NAIA Champion, but also was a finalist in the NCAA Division I National Championships held at Kent State University in 1963, losing a tight match to Billy Martin of Oklahoma State. Coach Kovalick’s 1964 wrestling team also won the West Virginia Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WVIAC) Wrestling Championships.

There is an interesting footnote regarding Coach Kovalick’s tenure at West Liberty State College. A couple days before one dual meet, his varsity wrestler became too sick to wrestle. Surprisingly, his manager, whose many duties included cleaning the uniforms and driving the team van to meets, asked Coach Kovalick if he could wrestle-off with the second-team wrestler.

Coach Kovalick said, “Okay.”

The manager won the wrestle-off, wrestled in the dual meet, and lost a very close match in overtime. Not too shabby. I was pinned in my first collegiate match.

It gets even better. Coach Kovalick’s manager was none other than OVAC Hall of Famer, Ron Mauck. Area mat-sport aficionados know the rest of Ron Mauck’s storied association with Ohio Valley wrestling for over 60 years.

Then Coach Kovalick’s family grew. He and his beloved wife, Evelyn, had four boys together: George, Mike, Will, and Joe. Thus, the Kovalick wrestling tradition continued.

George, the eldest son, was a multiple place winner in the OVACs. He was also a West Virginia state qualifier, who won the region one championship his senior year for the “Red Riders” of Weir High School.

Next came Mike Kovalick, whose career was both legendary and unique. As a scholastic wrestler, Mike was a two-time OVAC champion. Now get this. He was a two-time state champion in two different states. As a junior, Mike was a West Virginia State Champion at the 185-pound weight class, wrestling for Weir High School. His senior year he was an Ohio State Champion at the same weight class for Bellaire High School. Wow!

Another footnote. At both schools, his father was the assistant wrestling coach. In fact, Coach George Kovalick was named the “West Virginia Wrestling Coach of the Year” in 1974 as an assistant coach. Never before or since has an assistant coach ever received such an honor at the West Virginia State Wrestling Championships.

Securing a well-earned wrestling scholarship to Arizona State University, Mike ironically competed under the tutelage of legendary coach, Bobby Douglas – Coach Kovalick’s wrestling prodigy at Bridgeport High School. As a senior, Mike was a finalist in the PAC-10 Wrestling Championships. For his high school and collegiate efforts on the mat, Mike Kovalick was inducted into the OVAC Hall of Fame in 2008.

Next is brother Will Kovalick. And the beat goes on. Will was also a multiple OVAC place winner. He capped his mat career as a John Marshall “Monarch,” being crowned the West Virginia AAA Wrestling Champion at the 155-pound weight class in 1977. If you ever had to follow in the footsteps of a successful older brother in athletics, you would understand the internal pressure that Will had to

deal with and overcame. Will Kovalick was under the expert guidance of John Marshall coaching legend and OVAC Hall of Famer – Coach Bill Hinegardner.

Finally, there is Joe Kovalick. He listened to the beat of a different drummer. Joe played football, ran track, and excelled as a gymnast. Still, Joe had wrestling DNA in his blood. Both his daughters – Alexandra and Evan – wrestled in California, placing in numerous wrestling tournaments. I had the pleasure of meeting them when their late grandfather was inducted into the West Virginia Chapter of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2007.

A final footnote. To my knowledge, Coach George Kovalick is the only national wrestling figure to be inducted into two state chapters. In 2010, he became a member of the Ohio Chapter of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

The first “Mr. Mat” recipient in 1976, Coach George Kovalick was truly a “master of the mats.” Before his passing, the “George E. Kovalick Scholarship” was established in 1980, which is presented to a deserving OVAC wrestler each year. Furthermore, Coach “K” was inducted as a charter member of the OVAC Hall of Fame in 2004.

But he was so much more. George Kovalick was a devoted husband to his wonderful wife, Evelyn, and a loving father who taught his sons to be men of character.

I miss his wisdom.