

40 top power players in high school sports

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Darren Cooper NorthJersey.com USA TODAY NETWORK —
NEW JERSEY

This is the 11th edition of the North Jersey power players list, and each year presents a different challenge. It's a list meant to spotlight the important people in North Jersey athletics at this point and time — the ones making the decisions and controlling the agenda. Each year I strive to make the list more inclusive, because that is a true portrait of our society in 2022. It's still tough to find women who are involved at a high level. Is this intentional? I'll leave that up to you to decide.

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I start thinking about this list early in the year, looking for clues. Sometimes people just appear, sometimes recommendations are made. The core people remain the same.

Some are ranked just based on the position they hold, but that power is wielded differently each year. Some years that power is on display, some years it's in the background. That's up to me to decide.

After two years at the top, NJSIAA executive director Colleen Maguire is no longer No. 1. It's not anything Maguire did or didn't do. By virtue of her position she's the most powerful person in New Jersey high school sports, but our No. 1 for this year is more hands-on in North Jersey. He combines power at the local and state level.

Here is the Top 40 for 2022:

40. Tom Kaechele (posthumously)

Former Old Tappan athletic director Last year's ranking: Not ranked Spot No. 40 is the traditional Mickey Corcoran spot, named for the legendary Bergen County mentor, athletic director, coach and official. My belief is Mickey would be honored to see Kaechele in this position. Kaechele died in April after 24 years as AD at Old Tappan. He was a tireless advocate for North Jersey student-athletes and you just know the success Old Tappan had this past fall has him smiling with joy.

39. Justin Wimberly

CEO of Zone6ix Sports Last year's ranking: Not ranked Is this our first father-son tandem on the list? Zone 6ix Sports is ... well, it defies easy explanation. It's a marketing, publicity and communications outfit. It has brought some pizzazz and style to North Jersey high school events with Justin at the helm. He's got more ideas and I can't wait to see them come to a field/court near you.

38. Jimmy Mullen

St. Joseph Regional senior wrestler/ football player Last year's ranking: Not ranked If No. 40 is the Corcoran spot, I also save a spot for one North Jersey athlete who is the Buzz Kid, the one everyone else is watching. This year it's Mullen, who became the first North Jersey athlete with his own real NIL deal. He's a two-sport star looking to win a third state wrestling title in March.

37. Mike Rooney

Don Bosco baseball coach Last year's ranking: Not ranked Rooney has been on this list before. Last year, he put the Ironmen on top of the New Jersey baseball mountain. That mountain has never been more competitive. He does it with a quiet, understated style that his players respond to.

36. Jimmy Salmon

NJ Legacy/Paterson Rec Basketball supervisor Last year's ranking: Not ranked If there's a great basketball player in North Jersey, Salmon has probably either coached them, is coaching them or will coach them.

35. Doug Fillis

Founder, Accelerate Sports Ventures Last year's ranking: Not ranked You may not know Fillis' name yet, but you will. He has become a big part of the Super Football Conference's management team, and helped bring sponsorships to the league. He's also a leading authority on the NIL rules and what they mean for a high school athlete.

34. Jeff Koehler

Tenaflly volleyball, basketball and softball coach Last year's ranking: Not ranked When does this man sleep? Or find a time to grade tests? Koehler is one of the few three-sport coaches still around in North Jersey. No one has more fun or is more invested in the well-being of Tenaflly athletes than he is.

33. Mike Oppido

Demarest athletic director Last year's ranking: Not ranked Oppido took over for the esteemed Greg Butler at Demarest and has kept the athletic program on track. You know, some years I do this list and think to myself, this person could be No. 1 one day. Oppido could be No. 1 on this list as he continues to plant his roots and grow his influence all over North Jersey.

32. Brian Dunn

Old Tappan football and girls basketball coach Last year's ranking: Not ranked Dunn is the first Bergen County public school football coach to win a Group title. He did it by doing what he does best: preparing, working, and getting his teams to buy in. He has no flash whatsoever. He just puts in the time and lets the results speak for themselves.

31. Eli Hodges

New York Jets Senior Manager, Community Relations Last year’s ranking: Not ranked Girls flag football has taken over the spring calendar in North Jersey. It continues to grow thanks to the partnership of the Jets and the football leagues. Hodges is the Jets’ point person on flag football who has opened up the doors of MetLife Stadium for North Jersey athletes.

30. Mark Bitar

Referee assignor/NFL official Last year’s ranking: 33 The North Jersey football community has a real ace in the hole in Bitar, who can answer every question any coach or athletic director needs to know.

29. Tara Madigan

Northern Highlands girls soccer coach Last year’s ranking: 32 The Highlanders haven’t won real big again ... yet, but Madigan is still one of the best-known and talented coaches North Jersey has ever produced.

28. Dan Marangi

St. Joseph football coach/athletic director Last year’s ranking: 30 Marangi has slowly started to turn the Green Knights into his program. He made a calculated – and risky – move to change the football team’s offensive philosophy. It worked to a point, but it is the wave of the football future. Thoughtful, inventive and hard-working, Marangi embodies the St. Joe’s mindset.

27. Dan Sabella

Don Bosco football coach Last year’s ranking: 21 Losing in the state football final hurts, really hurts, for Don Bosco. But Sabella knows that all he can do is put his nose down and keep going. He’s not going to panic. The Ironmen will be fine.

26. Dr. Brian Mahoney

President of Bergen Catholic Last year’s ranking: 29 Mahoney fits his school’s identity so well. He’s always up for a good time, always promoting his school and always wanting the alumni to be proud. He’s genuine; I think that’s what impresses me the most.

25. Chris Brown

Park Ridge athletic director Last year’s ranking: 25 I’ve said this before about Chris, but remember, North Jersey isn’t anything but a bunch of little towns bordering on another. Brown makes sure everyone remembers all those little towns when it comes to athletics and is a respected voice in NJIC meetings.

24. Maria Nolan

Immaculate Heart Academy volleyball coach Last year’s ranking: Not ranked The Blue Eagles are coming off another state title, and one of these days we may realize what a trailblazer Nolan has been in her career. There’s nothing left for her to win (her win

total is 1,101), so she derives the joy from seeing her players excel at the highest level.

23. John McKenna

DePaul athletic director Last year's ranking: 22 DePaul just keeps winning, and winning big. McKenna has found the right formula of coaches who expect a lot from their teams and want to be successful. It's similar to what he did as a coach.

22. James Magazine

Eastside football coach Last year's ranking: 20 What Magazine has done at Eastside since taking over has been remarkable. He's instilled discipline and accountability and turned the Ghosts into a Group 5 power. You may not know Magazine real well, but college football coaches definitely do.

21. Greg Bailey

NJSIAA football coordinator Last year's ranking: 9 I was at the state football finals at Rutgers talking to NJSIAA executive director Colleen Maguire when Bailey ran out on the field to make sure the postgame ceremony went as planned. Maguire just said to me, "he's such a fan." It's true. There's no one more passionate about high school athletics than Bailey. His position as "coordinator" is loosely defined, but mainly it's to be a fan and make sure everything goes right.

20. Danny Brown

Saddle River Day athletic director Last year's ranking: 19 Brown stepped back from his role as girls basketball coach after an unfortunate incident over the summer. He was cleared by the school of any wrongdoing and that's what was important to him. Brown's real legacy will be turning the Rebels girls basketball program into a statewide powerhouse.

19. Dave Bell

Bergen Catholic wrestling coach Last year's ranking: 17 Speaking of powerhouses, Bell has carried Bergen Catholic wrestling into the forefront of New Jersey for more than a decade. They are the Yankees, Manchester United and the New England Patriots rolled into one. You may beat them (I know, Delbarton), but you know you have to go through Bell and Bergen Catholic for anyone to take you seriously.

18. Colin Church

Bergen County Coaches Association president/Hackensack ice hockey coach Last year's ranking: Not ranked The BCCA is still a big player in North Jersey athletics, sponsoring county tournaments. This is Church's first year as president and his background as a coach gives him valuable perspective.

17. Greg Russo

Paramus Catholic football coach Last year’s ranking: 12 Well, it wasn’t the year Russo wanted when he took over the Paladins. They lost a couple of close games and Russo was ensnared in a recruiting scandal and is now suspended for the first four games of next year by the NJSIAA. He will appeal, for sure. Don’t forget though, Russo can coach, and no matter how many obstacles he has to overcome, he will not stop until he is successful.

16. Jeff Jasper

Pascack Valley girls basketball coach Last year’s ranking: 26 I never know where to put Jasper on this list. You could make the case he should be No. 1. I mean, who has the institutional knowledge of North Jersey athletics like he does? Is there anyone he can’t call who won’t answer the phone? (He will joke maybe his wife, Lois). Savor the time we still have with Jasper on the Valley bench. He certainly does. He’s long past wins and losses. It’s about effort and growth.

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15. Nic Nese

Passaic Tech athletic director Last year’s ranking: 28 The Bulldogs are the Passaic County monster that’s about to roar. With a sprawling, gorgeous campus and amazing facilities, Passaic Tech is set up for major success for years to come. Nese is the point person.

14. John Jacob

New Jersey Football Coaches Association commissioner Last year’s ranking: 13 It was a relatively quiet year on the football front in New Jersey, probably because we finally got the state championships we all wanted. What’s next for Jacob? Could it be bringing in 6-man football for smaller schools? More opportunities for minority coaches? Jacob has shown he’s adept at handling any challenges.

13. Sharon Hughes

President of Big North Conference Last year’s ranking: 16 Beloved by her peers, Hughes is a stabilizing force for the Big North Conference who keeps everyone on the same page.

12. Bill Vacca

Passaic County Coaches Association executive secretary Last year’s ranking: 14 Vacca fits into the Jasper mold. Is there anyone in Passaic County who won’t accept a phone call from Vacca? He’s involved at every level of high school sports in the area.

11. Nicole Pacciani

President of Bergen County Women Coaches Association Last year's ranking: 11 Pacciani has shown that the BCWCA isn't afraid to adjust to changes and alter the format for its events. It takes true leadership to look around and try something new. Pacciani should be commended for getting the BCWCA to think outside the box.

10. Benjie Wimberly

State Assemblyman (D-Paterson)/ New Jersey Minority Coaches Association Last year's ranking: 10 Still a coach at heart, Wimberly goes to more games and ribbon-cutting events than anyone I know. It seems like he's constantly winning awards from civic groups. North Jersey is lucky to have Wimberly in its corner. He tells the truth. He speaks his mind. We should all listen more often.

9. Stan Fryczynski

North Jersey Interscholastic Conference executive director Last year's ranking: 8 Unflappable, Fryczynski has kept the NJIC relevant and together during his tenure. It's not an easy job to handle the demands of 30-plus schools and all the petty rivalries that can develop, but Fryczynski is always willing to listen and advise, keeping what's best for the conference at the top of his list.

8. Denis Nelson

River Dell athletic director/SFC executive director Last year's ranking: 6 Under Nelson, the Super Football Conference has signed new sponsorship deals setting itself up to expand its brand outside of North Jersey. Respected by his counterparts, Nelson leads the way in North Jersey.

7. David Frazier

Rutherford athletic director/NFHS Northeast rep Last year's ranking: 18 Even his colleagues tease Frazier for all of the different committees and groups he's on. If we tried to list them all here, it would overwhelm the page. Quiet and thoughtful, North Jersey is fortunate to have someone like Frazier who is connected to the highest levels of high school athletics administration.

6. Dan Vivino

Westwood athletic director/Big North/SFC scheduler Last year's ranking: 5 A SFC schedule reveal show? Why not? While it was a good show, the real star was Vivino's handiwork, putting together a football schedule involving more than 100 teams and countless divisions and rivalries. Somehow, he makes it all work while running his own successful athletic department. Next year, it should be the Dan Vivino Show.

5. Paul Popadiuk

NJSIAA Chief Compliance Officer Last year's ranking: Not ranked Stepping in for Kim Degraw-Cole at the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association, it was Popadiuk who helped put together the new rules on recruiting and allowing kids one free

transfer in New Jersey. He’s writing the rules that will impact the state for years to come.

4. Tom Mullahey

Past President of NJSIAA/Clifton athletic director Last year’s ranking: 3 With his experience all over New Jersey, when Mullahey speaks at an NJSIAA meeting, people listen. He’s smart, well-connected and admired. Few people can outwork Mullahey.

3. Vito Campanile

Bergen Catholic football coach Last year’s ranking: 4 Two years in a row, Vito has taken his team to No. 1 in New Jersey ... and it probably would be three if not for COVID. Honest to fault, loyal and trustworthy, Vito has found a home at Bergen Catholic. He’s the leader in North Jersey football right now and it’s not even close.

2. Colleen Maguire

NJSIAA Executive Director Last year’s ranking: 1 Maguire didn’t do anything to not be No. 1, it’s just probably someone else’s time. She continues to drive the NJSIAA agenda forward. Has everyone agreed with all of the organization’s decisions? No. But she always says she wants feedback from the coaches and ADs in New Jersey and will adjust accordingly. There is no reason not to believe her when she says that.

1. Paul Sarlo

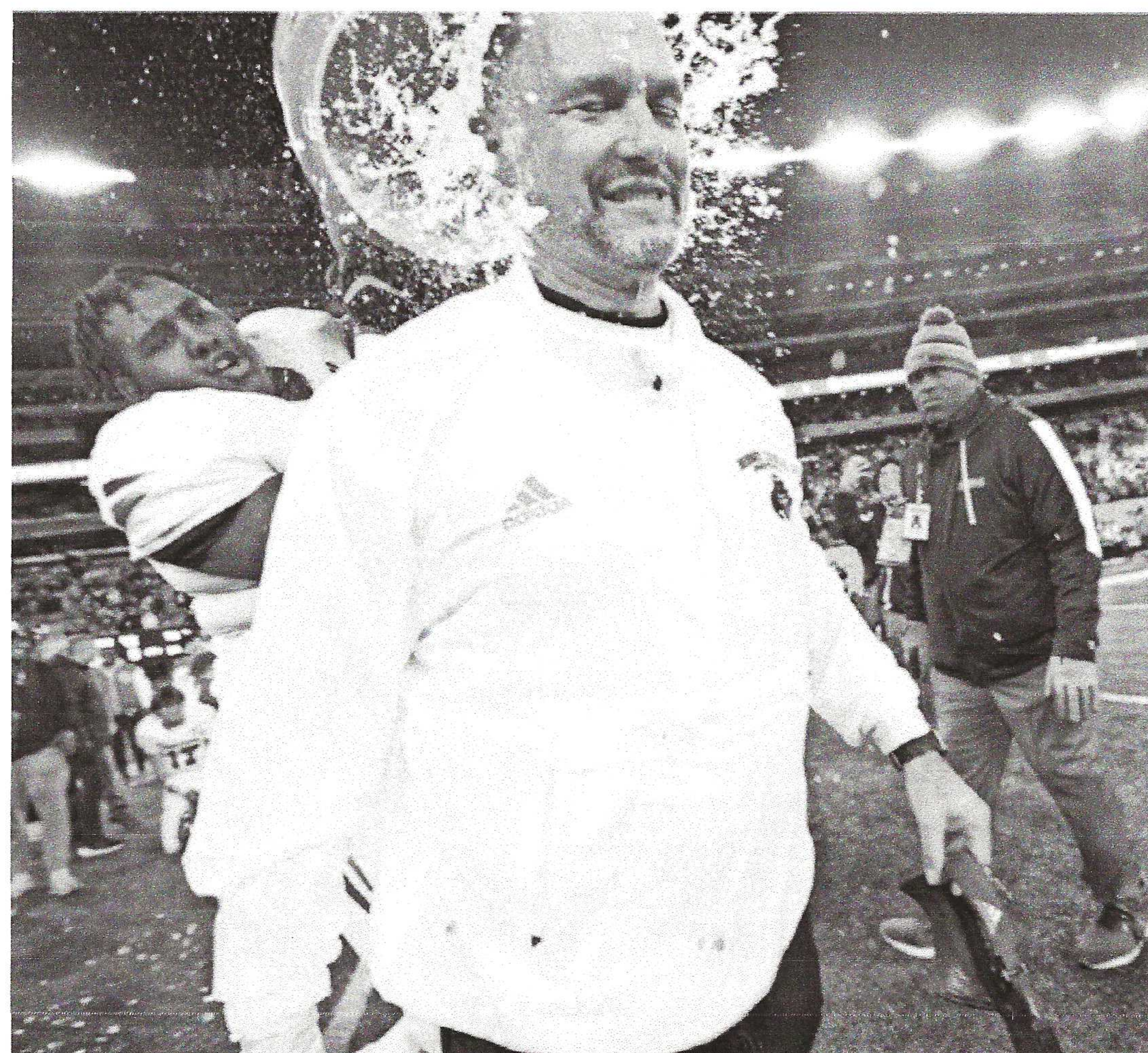
State Senator/Assemblyman (DWood- Ridge)/NJSIAA executive committee member Last year’s ranking: 3 His positions in state government give Sarlo a level of power than no one else on this list enjoys, yet he’s still deeply connected to New Jersey high school athletics. With his Wood-Ridge roots, he understands what it’s like for a small school and a small town to compete and thrive, but he also gets what the elite/non-public schools need.

He’s quietly helped the NJSIAA out financially through his connections. He’s turned Wood-Ridge into a town with the best fields and facilities in Bergen County. And after all that, he still loves going to games and watching kids compete. His passion for North Jersey athletics is unmatched and he belongs at No. 1.

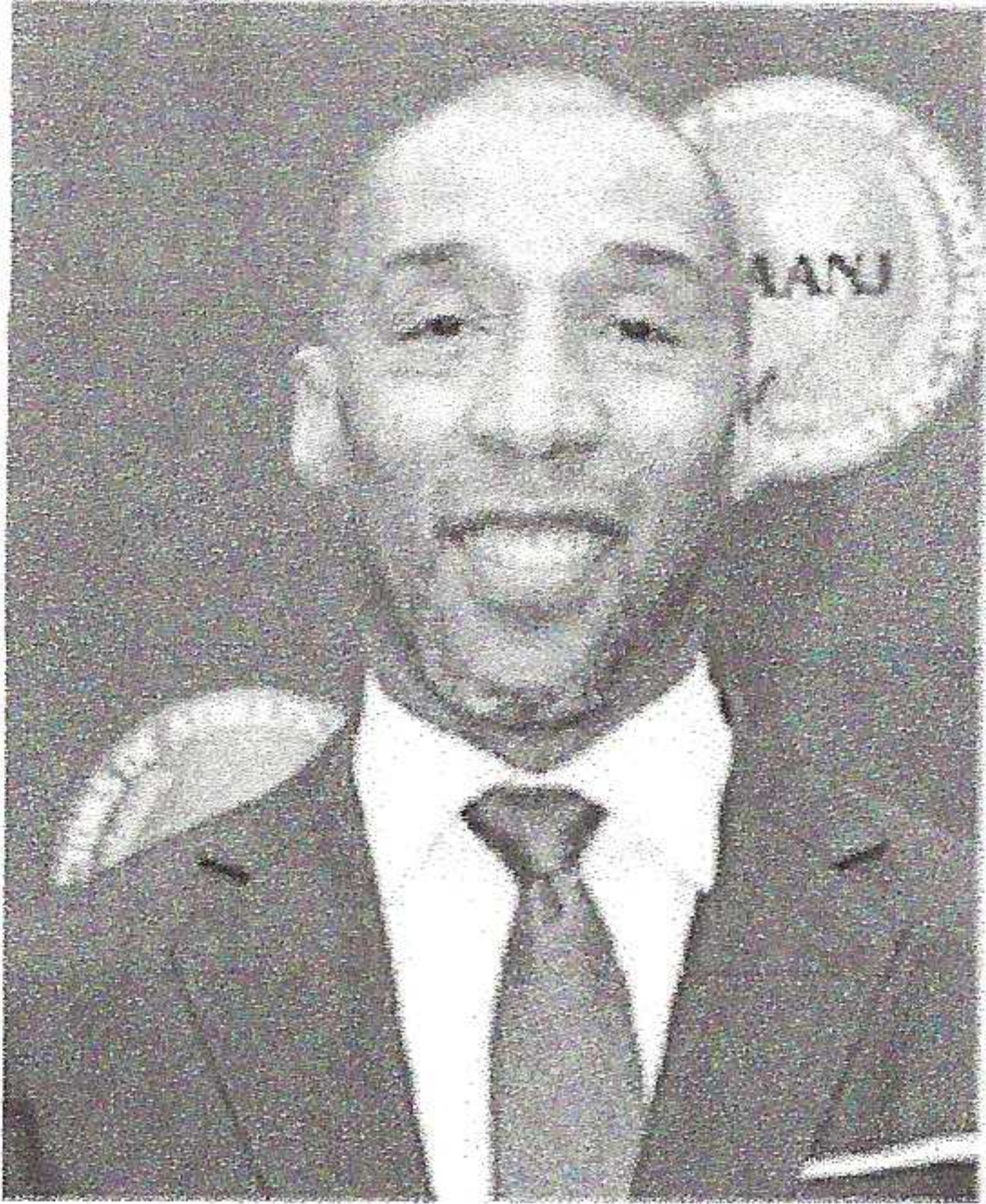
PLAYERS
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From bottom left, clockwise: Immaculate Heart volleyball coach Maria Nolan; St. Joseph's football coach/AD Dan Marangi; Pascack Valley girls basketball coach Jeff Jasper; Tenaflly three-sport coach Jeff Koehler; and St. Joseph Regional senior wrestler/football player Jimmy Mullen. NORTHJERSEY.COM PHOTOS



Bergen Catholic coach Vito Campanile and his team celebrate after defeating Don Bosco in the Non-Public A football championship on Nov. 25. MICHAEL KARAS/NORTHJERSEY.COM



David Frazier



State Senator Paul Sarlo

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From upstarts to heavy hitters

Friday Dec 30, 2022

Paramus Catholic doubles up on gold at the Sam Cali wrestling tournament

Sean Farrell

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MADISON – Max Acciardi tries to wrestle a little differently than the usual heavyweight.

For the Paramus Catholic senior, that requires speed, a strict diet and a daily 2-mile run in the morning.

“I love running,” Acciardi said. “It’s my favorite thing to do.”

Acciardi ran circles around the competition on Wednesday at the Sam Cali Invitational Wrestling Tournament. The Woodcliff Lake native defended his title by beating Daniel Elyash (Paramus), 16-4, in the final match of the annual two-day tournament. It was his only bout that went the distance after three straight pins in the opening minute.

The two-time state medalist noted that he’s cut some weight and improved his mental state since an ultimate tiebreak loss in last year’s semifinal round at Boardwalk Hall.

“In my 23 years of coaching, I’ve never had a heavyweight work as hard as he does as far as the conditioning aspect and the mental aspect,” coach Jon Piela said. “He’s the complete wrestler. A guy that you really want on your team to be the leader.”

For the last four years, Acciardi has assumed that role for the Paladins during their rise from an upstart program to one of the heavy hitters of New Jersey wrestling.

Six teammates joined him on the podium at FDU Madison – including 190-pound champion Xavier Williams – to help Paramus Catholic finish second behind Blair Academy, 292-214, in the overall team scoring race. That accomplishment isn’t lost on Acciardi, who’s old enough to remember a time when he was the school’s only Sam Cali medalist as a freshman.

“What we try and do is focus on us and getting better each day,” Piela said. “We’re happy with what happened today, but we know we still need to get better. I think we have a great environment where they feed off each other and push each other.”

Acciardi pushed the pace in the title match with two takedowns and two sets of back points in the first period. That was more than enough cushion for a wrestler who gave up only two offensive points in the tournament.

When asked about the championship bout, Acciardi deflected credit to Elyash and complimented Paramus for the caliber of wrestlers that have come through the program. While he knows

that it wasn't a perfect match, Acciardi is keeping the focus on the positives.

"I'm proud of how I wrestled that match," Acciardi said. "I'm going to see that kid in a dual so I'm looking forward to it. That kid is a great wrestler. He's going to be in the back of my mind for states because he's definitely going to make it there."

"His confidence has gone up without a doubt," Piela said. "He's a different type of wrestler now. He's wrestling more like a 190-pounder than a heavyweight. I think that confidence has also brought out a little bit of his personality."

Acciardi placed third in the state in 2021 and 2022 as a heavyweight and kicked off his senior season by reaching the Beast of the East final earlier this month. The latest win put him only 13 behind Diego Crespo (109) for the Paladins all-time record. Yet, that's hardly the focus.

"The only goal that's really in my mind is that state title," Acciardi said. "But I got to get past a couple hammers."

X marks the spot

Xavier Williams limped off the mat a winner. The Paramus Catholic sophomore was put in a compromising position late in the final against North Hunterdon's Alex Uryniak, but kept his cool amidst some hamstring pain.

Williams wrestled in and out of trouble in sudden overtime before hooking onto his opponent's right leg for the winning takedown.

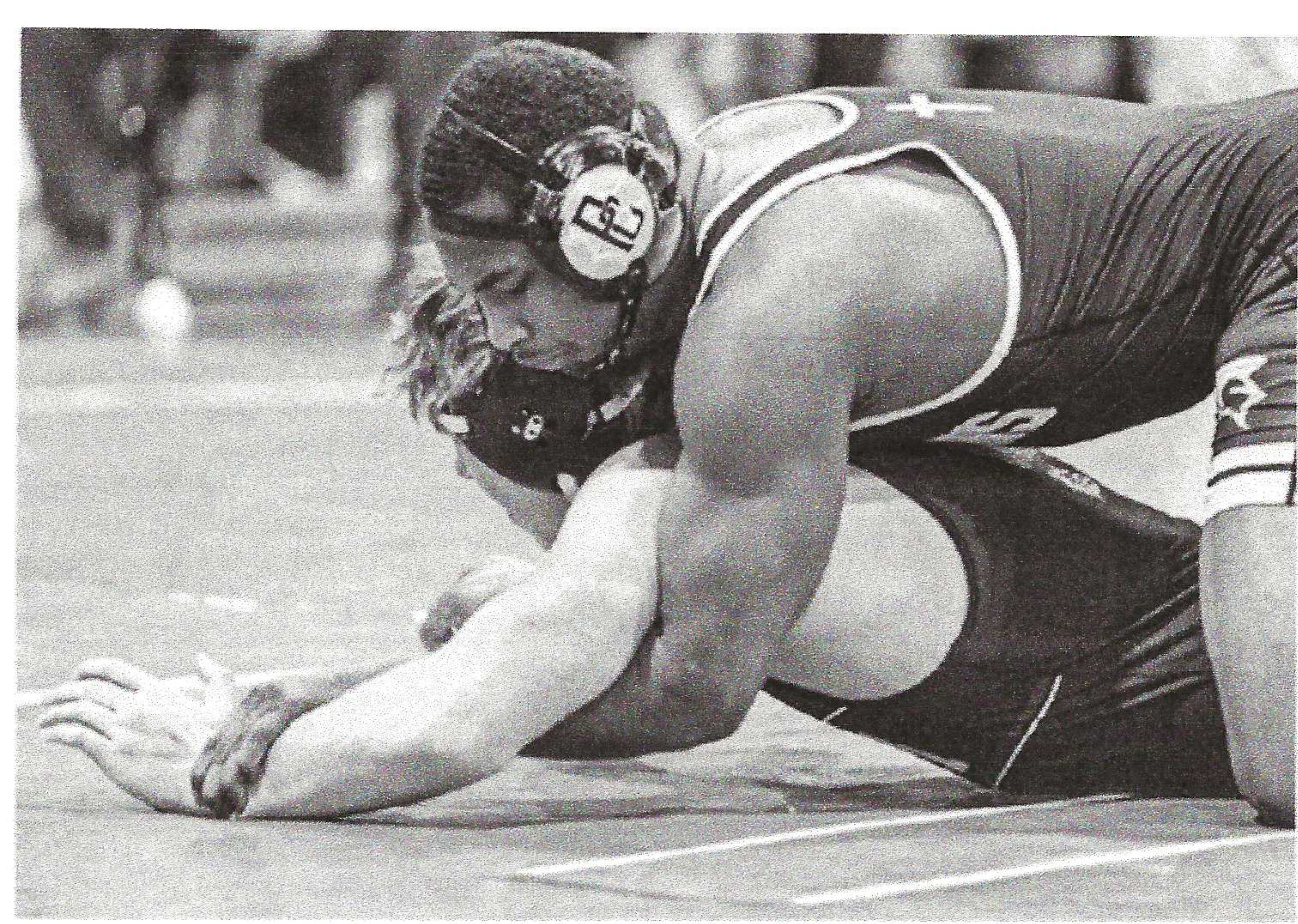
"When he took the shot (in the third period), I was in a little split," Williams said beating the top seed, 3-1. "I think I pulled it a little bit. But I just knew that I had to work harder when I got into the center."

Williams can get overshadowed on a team with four state medalists, but there is no doubt about his potential. The West Orange native reached the third round of wrestlebacks in Atlantic City last year as one of only two freshmen qualifiers at 190. Piela said his game is built on speed, agility and athleticism -- traits that helped him make the United White second-team at linebacker.

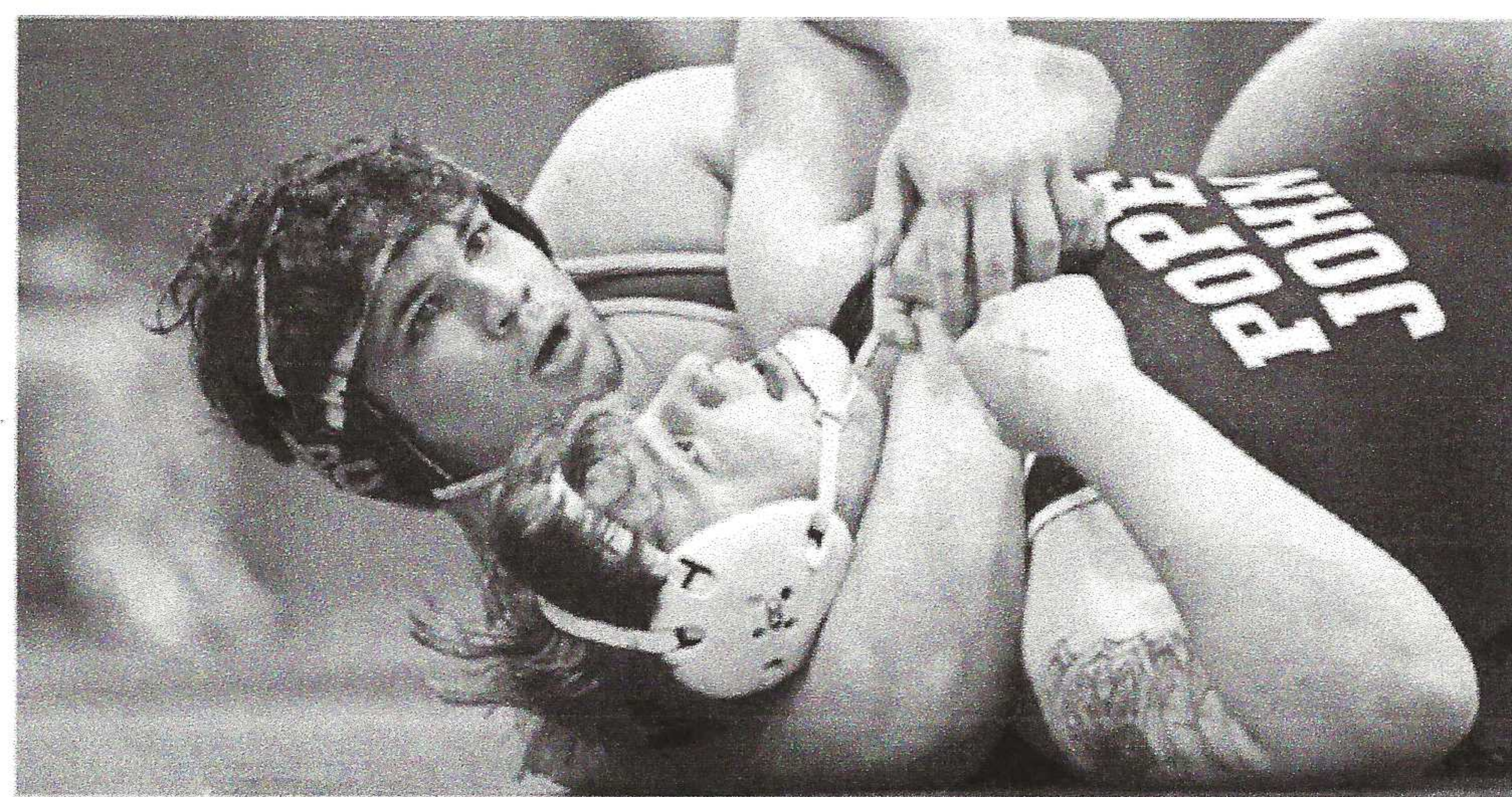
"I think football is my No. 1 sport, but I think I'm better at wrestling," Williams said. "I want to show everybody that I can do both."

Williams came into the finals with some momentum after beating Delsea's Daniel Digiovacchino to avenge a pair of losses from last season. In the championship, Williams went down 1-0 about halfway through before tying it up on a third-period escape.

"I just stayed calm because I know that I have pretty good defense," Williams said. "Anything that gets thrown at me, I know I can defend it."



Xavier Williams from Paramus Catholic defeats Conor Delaney from Rumson-Fair Haven in a 190-pound match at the Sam Cali Invitational Wrestling Tournament at the Ferguson Recreation Center at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison on Tuesday. ANNE-MARIE CARUSO/NORTHJERSEY.COM



Max Acciardi of Paramus Catholic, top, wrestles Jake Rubin of Pope John in a 285-pound bout during the North 1 Region wrestling meet at Mount Olive High School in 2021. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/NORTHJERSEY.COM