

THE BCCA HOLIDAY WRESTLING TOURNAMENT

(Last updated 1/8/2024)

A Brief History

The BCCA Holiday Wrestling Tournament began in 1960. With forty or more teams and over 400 wrestlers participating, it just might be one of the largest, continuously run high school tournaments of its type in the nation. It is the longest running county tournament in New Jersey, and this year is the 63rd.

The tournament, sponsored by the Bergen County Coaches Association, was originally conceived as a “top-flight tune up” for the coming dual meet season by Tenafly High School coach, Jack Armstrong. Ably assisted by the late Bill Powley, the first tournament was held in 1960 at River Dell Regional High School. The sixteen invited teams wrestled on horsehair mats borrowed from Fairleigh Dickinson University!

In 1965, Bill Powley became the tournament’s director, a post he would hold for the next twenty years. Bill, an outstanding soccer coach, would use his organizational skills to build the tournament to the high degree of excellence it holds today. Throughout this period, Bill was well-served by Assistant Director Sal Cascio (the legendary Bergenfield High School coach) and Assistant Director Edd Fitzgerald, who remains with the tournament to this day.

In 1975 the tournament expanded to thirty-two teams, the maximum then allowed by NJSIAA regulations. To accommodate this many teams the tournament was held at four sites on the first day, with the winners advancing to one site for the finals. A logistical nightmare, the tournament ran at two sites on day one for the next four years. Finally, in 1980, all thirty-two teams were brought together at one site, Hackensack High School. During this time the tournament had become so popular that a waiting list and rotating invitation system had to be designed. When the NJSIAA rules changed in 1982, all the interested teams could compete, and the Tournament took its present form. Now all matches could take place at one site over two consecutive days, a true test for the wrestler! As time went by, all non-Bergen schools, except Hudson County’s North Bergen High School, withdrew as wrestling in their own counties grew.

With so many schools involved, site location has always been a major concern. Over the sixty three years, sixteen different sites have hosted the tournament. For a number of years Paramus High School was the host. Utilizing two gyms and six mats, over 500 individual matches were conducted over a two day period.

A staff of over fifty people work skillfully to keep the competition moving, all to the delight of 3500+ fans that attend the tournament. All proceeds from the event go the BCCA to support other events and to fund their scholarship awards. Those other events include a BCCA Freshman Tournament, also conducted by the Holiday Tournament staff.

In 1985, George Jockish took over for Bill Powley, a position he would hold for eighteen years. An experienced wrestling official for more then thirty years, Jockish had directed numerous tournaments. He first became involved with the

Holiday Tournament in 1969 while coaching at North Bergen. He joined the staff as a regular in 1975 when the tournament expanded. It was at this time that he developed the computerized “criteria seeding system” that allows the entire tournament to be seeded after the weigh-in period. Completed within sixty minutes of the weigh in, it assures the most competitive and equitable tournament possible. What began as a “tune up” has now become one of the most prestigious championships a wrestler can earn.

Many outstanding wrestlers first made their mark in this tournament. A number of Holiday Tournament Champions have gone on to win the NJSIAA State Tournament, beginning with Rocky Gilmore (Teaneck) and Tom Bocchino (Fair Lawn) in 1961. Seventy five wrestlers have accomplished this double victory, thirty five since 2000. The most successful of all was Bergen Catholic’s Nick Suriano, a 4X NJSIAA Champ and State OW. Bergenfield’s Eddie Kochakji won three Holiday titles and three State titles in the mid 60’s. Eddie was also twice named the Outstanding Wrestler of the State Tournament. Lyndhurst’s Donnie Pritzlaff won three doubles in the 90’s. Thirty one wrestlers have won three Holiday titles, the latest being Michael Dellagatta and Jim Mullen of St Joseph and an elite ten have been crowned champion four times. They are Jason Hernandez of Bergen Catholic (1990-93), Eric Norgaard of St. Joseph (1996-99), Chris Bitetto of Hackensack (1997-00), Bryan Nunziato of Bergen Catholic (2000-03), Frank Cagnina of Bergen Catholic & Queen of Peace (2006-09), Nick Gravina of Northern Highlands (2009-12), Anthony Giraldo of North Bergen (2010-13), BC’s Johnny Sebastian (2010-13), and Zack Chakonis of Don Bosco. In 2015 Nick Suriano (2012-15) of Bergen Catholic joined this group. John Trumbetti of St. Joseph won 3 titles and might have had four until injury sidelined him in 2006. Damion Logan was on his way to a third title in 1995, but lost by DQ for a slam.

The Tournament’s Outstanding Wrestler award is dedicated to the memory of Paul Tashian. First awarded in 1964, only three Holiday champs have earned this distinction twice, Chris Catalfo (Pascack Hills), Allen Pascual (North Bergen), and Jason Hernandez.

The tournament also awards a trophy for “most falls in the least time”. The current record holder is Dovid Greenfield of Torah Academy who pinned six opponents in 16:38 in 2010.

As for the coveted Sal Cascio Team Championship, fourteen schools have won this most prestigious award. The current record holder is Bergen Catholic who won their 20th title in 2022. Bergenfield captured five starting in the late 60’s. Pascack Hills won ten titles in eleven years, from 1973 to 1983. Paramus broke that streak in 1978 and won again in 2008. Fair Lawn won five in a row from 1985 to 1989, and parochial power St. Joseph won three titles in the 1990’s, reclaiming the crown just before the pandemic in 2018 & 2019, then again last year. The other winners were: Teaneck (2), East Paterson, now Elmwood Park (1), Hackensack (1), Pascack Valley (3), Westwood (1), North Bergen (1), Don Bosco (4), and Old Tappan (1).

Beginning in 1984, the tournament also named group champions to give smaller schools an equal opportunity to win a title. Multiple Group winners (3 or more titles) include: Pascack Hills, Bergen Catholic, St. Joseph, Fair Lawn, Emerson/Park Ridge, Hasbrouck Heights/Wood-Ridge, Garfield, Lyndhurst, North Bergen, Westwood, Paramus, Don Bosco, River Dell, Pascack Valley, and Old Tappan.

A special honor given at the tournament is the William Powley Memorial Service to Wrestling Award. Beginning in 1969, the tournament recognized those individuals who have served the sport of wrestling. Not limited to coaches, the list includes reporters, a doctor, a contractor, wrestling officials, and tournament administrators. To date, eighty four people have been honored. The first, appropriately, was Jack Armstrong.

A prominent feature of the tournament is the comprehensive program produced each year since 1974. The program features a preview of all participating teams, pertinent information, and a complete history of tournament winners. This history helps to promote the great tradition of the tournament. A second program is on sale listing all medal matches and team scores for the first 62 years of the tournament, a great souvenir for the wrestling fan. The tournament website <https://www.bccawrestling.com/> features tournament information, brackets, statistics, sponsor ads, and historical news archives from the past 62 years.

The BCCA George Jockish Wrestling Tournament, as it is now known, will be held at Garfield Middle School for 2024. Competition will go back to the old format – all wrestlers seeded in each weight class with four championship semifinalists and four consolation semifinalists returning on day 2 to battle for 1st through 8th places.