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Murray's Law Prevails

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The Golden Eagles, the coaching staff, the athletic trainers, and the parents of the wrestlers posed for this shot after the team won the Division III National title in March.

Wrestling mentor is a born winner
by Mike Andriath '85

"I'll do this as long as I like it. I enjoy coaching more than anything else."

Those are the words of Don Murray '69, architect of arguably the best small college wrestling program in the country. In 22 years as head coach at SUNY Brockport, Murray has led the Eagles to five national championships and coached 83 All-Americans. Brockport has won 17 of the 22 SUNY Athletic Conference titles under Murray, nearly 80 percent of its dual matches, and finished in the top 20 at the nationals 21 of 22 years. As the wrestling promotional brochure says, if you wrestle for Murray at Brockport, "you're giving yourself the chance to win every honor available in the sport."

To many outside the College, Murray is an enigma, a man possessed by his love of the sport. He's in his Tuttle North office before anyone else is in the building, and his 1983 Lincoln Town Car can be seen in the parking lot well after everyone else has gone home.

One day of recruiting can take him from Buffalo to Syracuse and back to Rochester. He's put 170,000 miles on his car in five years. He's a tireless worker, willing to put in whatever it takes to give his team that extra edge, the edge that will win them the national championship.

In March, the Golden Eagles won their fifth title for Murray, pulling the biggest upset of his career with a victory over defending national champion Augsburg (MN) College. It was the school's first crown since 1983. Murray doesn't want to wait nine years for his sixth.

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From his days as a wrestler at Huntington High School on Long Island, Murray has been driven by the sport of wrestling. He graduated from Huntington on June 27, 1961, and was in the Air Force the next day. But even while stationed at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida for four years, Murray was wrestling, making it all the way to the Olympic Trials in 1964. It was during this part of his life that he decided he wanted to coach.

After being discharged in 1965, he enrolled at Nassau Community College, and two years later he was at Brockport. "We used to call him the oldest hippie in the world," said Regan Beers '70, a former teammate and the first national champion wrestler at the College. "He was a little stand-off-ish when we met him. He was in his mid '20s and had been in the service so he was quite a bit different than us. But he was a pretty darn good wrestler."

"He showed up on our doorstep," said Roscoe Hastings, Murray's first and only coach at SUNY Brockport. "We didn't recruit him. He was a good wrestler and had experience in the Air Force. But he was a funny wrestler. He never could get his head together for duels, but he was great in tournaments."

So great that Hastings and former coach Thomas "Lefty" McIntyre, who began the program in 1962,
joke about the 1968 SUNYAC Tournament, which many felt would be SUNY Brockport’s first championship.

“Just in his first match, Don was killing the kid he was wrestling,” Hastings said. “But then he tore some rib cartilage and couldn’t continue. We ended up losing the championship by something like four or five points.”

“We figured Don wanted to be the coach when we won the first SUNYAC title,” McIntyre said.

He would be. After one year wrestling in the program, he decided he was wasting his time as a wrestler. “I was much more interested in coaching,” he said. “I started as the freshman coach. By 1970, he was training Beers to win the national title. That fall, he was named the varsity head coach. By 1972, the Eagles had won the SUNYAC title, and from 1974 to 1986, the team won all but one conference championship.

Murray had the job that he wanted, but he wanted more. “I was very liberal back then,” he said, “something his wrestlers of today would be stunned to hear. ‘I was very structured in the (wrestling) room, but I let the guys discipline themselves once they were out of practice. If I had it to do over again, I would have been tougher on the team outside of practice, like I am today.’

As a coach in his 20s — with no previous head coaching job — starting out in the early ’70s in the height of Vietnam, Murray was different. But, he hasn’t changed that much.

“He was a maniac,” said Beers. “He was so intense. During practice, we hated him. But he was totally different outside the wrestling room. He was like a big brother who made sure everything was okay.”

The big brother is now like a father figure. Murray constantly keeps tabs on his wrestlers. Many feel he’s too restrictive. But, he learned his lessons from the early days.

“We could have been so much better back then if I’d been tougher on them,” he said.

By the mid-’70s, Murray had begun to build a dynasty. The Eagles were fourth in the nation in 1974, then won their first national title in 1977. “I became more structured outside the room, and that got us over the hump,” he said. “We never had great talent on those teams.”

The Eagles won again in 1980 to start a string of three titles in four years. In 1981, when they didn’t win it, they finished second. That 1980 team started the career of SUNY Brockport’s greatest wrestling legend, and one of the College’s all-time great athletes, Frank Famiano ’83.

“I saw Frank in high school and he loved to throw,” Murray said. “He was only fifth in the states, but I knew he was going to be a good one.”

Famiano was that. An All-American all four years, he was the national champion and Outstanding Wrestler at the nationals in both 1982 and 1983, and went on to earn Division I All-American status in each season. In 1984, Famiano was named to the U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling team and took fifth at the Los Angeles Games in the 125-pound weight class.

From 1980 to 1983, SUNY Brockport wrestlers earned All-American status 24 times. Murray had to rebuild, but it wasn’t long before he was back at the top. From a 13th place showing in 1984, the Eagles moved up to fifth. In 1986 and 1987, the Eagles posted back-to-back second place finishes with what Murray calls his most talented teams. Blessed with senior leadership, Murray had loosened the reins, but the Eagles had fallen short. The following fall, he was on a tear again.

A 5-5 record in 1988 and a 59th place showing with no All-Americans marked a brutally tough campaign. But Murray knew the team was rebuilding, and he had talent.

Up to 12th in 1989, the Eagles had jumped an astonishing 37 places in the national rankings. In 1990, sophomores Fritz Zagorski ’93 and Brian Quick ’92 won national...
titles as the team finished fifth. The Eagles were back.
Sixth place in 1991 was more a case of bad luck. Zagorski was
injured in the quarterfinals and could barely wrestle in the semifinals as the
Eagles lost valuable points.

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With four seniors in the lineup, Murray’s charges easily turned back
challenge after challenge as the 1991-92 season began. The Eagles
were very impressive in early season tournaments at Penn State and
Ohio State and coasted through duels over national powers Cortland
and Trenton State. The team was
the top Division III school at the
state tournament, and the Eagles
had four champions at the Empire
Conference National Qualifier, the
most of any school.

Up until the Saturday afternoon
of this year’s nationals, other than wrestling, the College’s winter ath-
letic season had been less than satisf-
ying. That was up until that
Saturday.

Riding the crest of another out-
standing national performance by
Quick, and a brilliant run to the fi-
nal by fellow-senior Chris Stevens
92, the SUNY Brockport wrestling
team of 1992 accomplished what
only a few outside this College com-

munity felt it could, winning the
school’s fifth wrestling national title
— and first since 1983.

“It’s a great feeling,” said Murray,
who was named NCAA Division III
Coach of the Year for the second
time at the conclusion of the tour-
ament. “All of the matches were so
close. We seemed to be behind in
every match. This was probably the
toughest one, but also one of the
most satisfying.”

The Eagles scored 76.5 points to
outdistance defending champion
and heavily favored Augsburg (MN).
The Auggies had 62.5 points, and
had been top-ranked in every poll
for each of the last two years. They
blew away the competition at the
1991 nationals.

“These guys worked so hard and
didn’t give up,” Murray of his team.
“They could have given in on
Friday, but they didn’t. They won
every match they had to.”

Murray gave assistant coaches
John Leone ‘88 and Pete
Mankowich ‘92 great credit for the
win. “They did fantastic jobs in get-
ing the guys ready.”

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Quick is the first wrestler in
school history to have appeared in
three straight national finals, having
won the crown in 1990 and again
this year after a second-place finish
last year. He concluded his career
with four conference titles and lost
just one match to a Division III
wrestler in his final three years. He
is just the third two-time national
champion in school history.

“He really hasn’t changed that
much in my four years,” said Quick,
who’s name is already being men-
tioned in the same breath as
Famiano and Ron Winnie ’83, the
other two-time national champs,
and Leone, a four-time All-
American. “He still has the leash on.”

The leash comes from Murray’s
views on society and the importance
of keeping his “family” together.

“He talks to us about how the
families of today are going through
divorces and how they’re not like
they were 20 years ago,” Quick said.

And that reflects on the kids.

“Today, if a kid can’t step right in
and start, he quits,” Murray said. “It
wasn’t like that. They stepped right in.
They worked hard for two years, then
stepped into the lineup.”

Murray let his seniors take charge
much more this year than he had in
recent seasons, but Quick is quick
to point out that everyone knew
where the leadership came from.

“He was leading by example,” the
senior said. “We were just following
the rules. He stays in the final say.
But, he did sit down and ask our
opinions. If a freshman did some-
thing wrong, we would tell him
what he did when we were fresh-
men, then he would go and make
his decision. I’ve always had great
respect for the man based on the
decisions he has made.”

Respect. Murray has got it. Over
the final two months of the season,
he was inducted into the New York
State Wrestling Hall of Fame and
and the Division III Wrestling Hall of
Fame, was named the National
Coach of the Year, and guided his
team to a fifth national crown.

“I’ll do this as long as I like it.”
From the look of things, that
could be quite some time.

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John Leone was a four-time All-
American in the mid-80s.