

THE DAILY NEWS
SPORTS

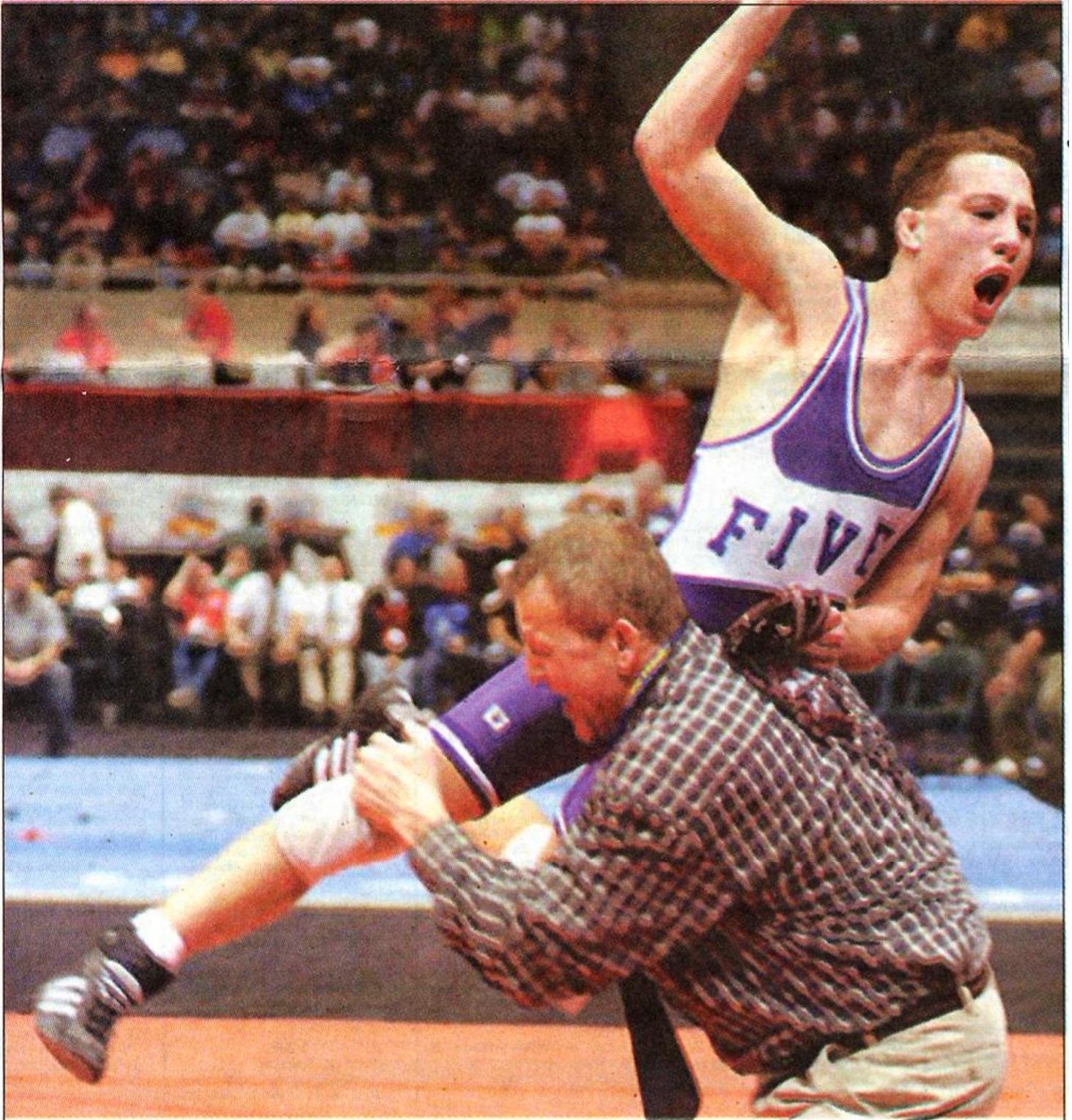
JUST SAY NO: Wide receiver Eric Moulds has now rejected a second request from the Buffalo Bills to take a pay cut in order to stay with the team.

Page B-3



SECTION
B
Friday,
March 3, 2006

SPORTS SPOTLIGHT



Michael Johnson/For The Daily News

THIRD TIME'S A CHARM: Three-time state tournament finalist Mike McNally of Byron-Bergen jumps onto coach Mike Jeffords' shoulders after capturing the Division II state title at 119 pounds on Saturday. McNally, a senior, became Byron-Bergen's first-ever state wrestling champ while capping his high school career with an undefeated season. He had finished second the previous two seasons.

McInally's state wrestling crown was best gift a coach could get

For the past 24 years, Byron-Bergen wrestling coach Mike Jeffords had waited for a moment like this.

And Mike McInally was the one that wanted to give it to him.

These two had been through so much together — it would only seem fitting.

Last Saturday, in front of more than 10,000 screaming fans at the Nassau Coliseum in Long Island, McInally etched himself into Byron-Bergen school history as he became the first B-B wrestler to win a state title with his convincing 6-1 win over Justin Seifried of Mohawk (Section 2) in the 119-pound finals.

After shaking his opponent's hand, the emotional McInally sprinted directly into coach Jeffords' arms, almost leaping over him.

McInally had done it.

After two consecutive state finals losses, the senior known for his passion and enthusiasm, had hit the top of the state wrestling mountain, a climb



**Chris
METCALF**

very few get to enjoy.

Jeffords had been there for every McInally match, all 200-plus of them. He was the one who comforted Mike after he lost a 17-1 decision in the Supersectional finals in Mike's eighth-grade year, a season where Mike had gone from a jayvee nobody to a sectional champion.

He was front and center Mike's freshman season when he lost a heartbreaking overtime criteria match to Canandaigua's Rocco Catalfamo in the Super semis.

And yes, he was the first one to hug

Mike immediately following both of those painful state championship losses.

He had seen it all. He had watched Mike transform himself from a youthful modified wrestler into a varsity man among boys.

About 10 minutes after McInally's state final victory, I pulled Jeffords aside to get a few words.

When I asked him about what emotions were running through his mind — all the time he had spent with Mike and Mike's twin brother Steve, all the preparation and hard work that it took to get there, and all the time he had spent dreaming of this championship moment — Jeffords couldn't hold back the tears — tears of absolute joy.

He patted me on my shoulder as I was taking down notes, and as I turned to look at him, he signaled for me to hold on — he couldn't speak — the tears were getting in the way.

See Metcalf — page B-3

Metcalf

— From page B-1

He walked toward the corner of the Coliseum, about 15 feet away, tears of joy running wildly down his face. He was paralyzed with emotion.

"This is what coaching is all about," I said to myself.

I let him enjoy the tears. He was laughing, and crying. He couldn't stop. He had found his happy place, and there was no way I was getting in the way. As he was attempting to gather his emotions, I started thinking to myself how special a moment this was, the type of moment that coaches work their entire life for.

You see, wrestling coaches are a different breed than most. They spend numerous hours on top of hours with their athletes. Not to say that other coaches don't put their time in — but I think it's fair to say that wrestling coaches put in a little more time than most.

From the daily three-hour practice regimen, where coaches usually throw on their gear and get right it there and mix it up, to the endless hours spent at weekend tournaments.

Not like a basketball game where after three hours you're back home with your family.

Wrestling coaches are usually out the door by 6 a.m. the morning of tournaments, not returning until somewhere just before midnight. And when you are coaching a wrestler as talented as Mike McNally, you won't be home after the first round — just plan on being there all day and night.

Wrestling coaches build more of a personal relationship with their top guys, mainly because they spend more time in the corner with them with each talented wrestler advancing to the finals of most tournaments.

It was obvious to me that Jeffords was more than just a coach for Mike McNally.

Without Mike having a father to come home to, Jeffords stepped in and became

the father figure, handing out the day-to-day advice that any loving father would give their son. He had been there through thick and thin, for both Mike and Steve. Coach Jeffords had touched both their hearts, and they in turn had touched his.

Maybe that's what made this victory so special, so genuine.

Maybe that's why Jeffords was still crying as I continued to look over at him in the corner of the arena.

By this time, he kept putting his one finger in the air toward me as if to say "I'll be with you in a second."

Here, it was 10 minutes after I started the interview process, and Jeffords was still too emotional to talk, instead standing all by himself — and enjoying every second of it.

Byron-Bergen is extremely fortunate to have a coach like Mike Jeffords. A coach that was so happy for his wrestler that he couldn't get a word out to save his life.

Twenty-four years of emotions running wildly throughout the Nassau Coliseum.

He finally made his way over to me — his eyes more soaked than a water ride at Darien Lake, although he was doing his best to cover it up.

A few words finally came out.

"This is the greatest feeling in the world," Jeffords said. "I am just so proud of Mike and Steve. I just feel so fortunate to be able to share this kind of moment with them."

He started crying again and walked away, but before he got too far away I reached out for him.

"Go enjoy your cry, coach," I said to him with a pat on the back. "You have certainly earned it."

Off he went into the corner of the arena — back to his happy place, all by himself — enjoying the past 24 years.

(Chris Metcalf is sports editor of the Livingston County News, a Batavia Newspapers Corporation publication)