

WRESTLING WITH RETIREMENT

After 32 years directing the Newark wrestling program, Jack Fisher decides 'it's the right time' to walk away

By **CHRIS MARQUART**

FINGER LAKES TIMES

NEWARK — Slowly, one memory at a time, Jack Fisher is packing up his boxes in a historic corner of Newark High School.

The longtime coach and physical education instructor is retiring from teaching following the current school year. His tenure as wrestling head coach, which spanned four decades, ended in mid-February.

"There's never a perfect time to walk away," Fisher said, pointing out there are several second-generation wrestlers on his team who are sons of Fisher's past grapplers. "You always want to be there for someone, and that makes it tough. I'm leaving a good group."

"There's never a perfect time, but it's the right time."

Few coaches can look back on a career and reflect on these accomplishments: Four Section V team championships, 56 tournament titles and 326 dual meet wins; 43 individual sectional champions, eight state tournament representatives and 12 grapplers with more than 100 wins; and four Coach of the Year awards.

Fisher, 57, guided Newark's wrestling program for 33 years in addition to 24 seasons as a football assistant. He spent the past six falls with the Reds' girls tennis team, including 2006 as varsity coach, and the last four springs as a girls lacrosse assistant.

A former college lacrosse player, Fisher was instrumental in the formation of the Reds' boys

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Lauren Long / Finger Lakes Times

Jack Fisher spent 32 of the past 35 winters directing the Newark wrestling program.

Finger Lakes Times (Geneva, NY)

Tuesday, March 27, 2007

armdrag.com

FISHER

Longtime Newark wrestling coach focused on a family-oriented program

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program.

"Jack is a Newark icon," remarked Len Colavito, who worked with Fisher for many years when Colavito oversaw the Reds' football program and has taught driver's education with Fisher the past seven years. "He is a thorough guy. Whatever he did, he did 100 percent. You never had to worry about what he was going to do."

"I could leave (football) practice for a week, and he would have practice the same as when I left. He's a great father and husband, a great teacher, a great coach and a great disciplinarian."

To Fisher, it's not about the wins or trophies, the accomplishments or championships. What he'll remember most are the lives he's touched.

"It's tough to go through all the articles and pictures," Fisher said as he leafed through a mental scrapbook.

"Before Jack, Newark never had recognition in wrestling. We had wrestling, but no history," explained Chris Avery, a 1977 Newark graduate who wrestled for Fisher.

Fisher, a Long Island native who played four sports at Uniondale High School, took the helm of the wrestling program in 1973, kick-starting what would eventually turn into the longest coaching tenure in Newark High School history.

"When I took over, they never had a winning season, let alone a tournament title," Fisher remembered. "That year was the one that helped it start taking off. It was a great group of kids."

Fisher's first team included John VanLare and Jeff Kaller; VanLare's son, Josh, was the first son of a former wrestler to compete for Fisher. Kaller came back to help out Fisher in the late 1970s and early '80s before going to Victor as athletic director and varsity football and wrestling coach.

In 1974-75, junior Brian Williamson won Newark's first Section V individual title. The following year, Newark senior Harrison Allerton burst onto the area radar. Allerton won a Class AA sectional title to highlight a 27-1 season.

"He is a person who always looks for something positive in kids," noted Allerton, who went on to wrestle for Team USA in a dual against Iran. "It helps bring the best out of everyone, and he tried to focus on that. He's a good man. You have to admire him."

One match during Allerton's final campaign signaled the arrival of Newark wrestling as a force. Canandaigua was recognized as the area powerhouse at the time. In December 1975, the Braves scrapped by the Reds 24-21, using the match's only six forfeit points to claim the victory. Fisher considered it the turning point for Newark wrestling.

"It had always been a tough league, but that was the year we started to rise," Fisher said.

The Reds earned their first Section V team title in 1981. Bob Button and Scott Eberhardt were among the top performers that year. Button, a 215-pounder, won 37-1, won his fourth individual sectional title and logged a then-U.S. record 28 pins in a row.

Eberhardt, 33-4 that season, later represented the United States in a matchup with Poland.

"We see each other a few times a year and it is always nice to get together with him," Button said, adding that he still calls Fisher "Coach" or "Mr."

Scrapbook full of memories



Lauren Long / Finger Lakes Times

Here are some tidbits from Jack Fisher's 32-year tenure as Newark wrestling coach:

■ Wayne County District Attorney Rick Healy was a member of Fisher's first team in 1972-73.

■ Two of Fisher's former wrestlers, Harrison Allerton and Scott Eberhardt, represented Team USA in international matches.

■ In 1981, Bob Button capped a career in which he went 140-12 by setting a school record with 28 consecutive pins. He also set then-national records for pins in a tournament (9) and fastest pin (6 seconds). The three-time state tournament representative was a two-time Empire State Games gold medalist.

■ Newark won back-to-back Section V titles in 1992-93 and '93-94. Fisher was honored as Coach of the Year each time.

■ Jack Fisher Jr. posted a 120-10 record in his varsity career. That winning percentage still stands as the best in school history, as does his career mark of 17 tournament titles.

■ Jon Kelly set a single-season win record in 2001, going 44-2 in 2001. The three-time Section V champion won seven tournaments that year.

■ Kelly's classmate, Eric Spratley, won six tournaments in 2001. The two-time sectional champ finished his career with a school-record 162 wins.

Allerton was an assistant for several years.

"Chris and Harrison always said they would come back and help me out," Fisher said, adding Allerton still helps out on occasion. "Harrison has a boy (Isaac) in the modified program. Chris has got a kid on the varsity team (Alex) and another son in the modified program (Nolan)."

Aside from his three-year hiatus, Fisher missed only two matches as head coach, one after his mother, Marie, died in 1987. The other was Jan. 29, 1972, the day he married Kathie, whom he met when she was secretary to the athletic director.

"Since the Newark tournament falls on that anniversary, we never really got a honeymoon," Fisher said. "It will be nice to be with my wife during anniversary time."

Fisher coached his sons in Little League and peewee sports, and when they reached high school. He was on Colavito's staff when the Reds won a sectional title in 1990 — Colavito's son, Chris, and young Jack Fisher were on that team. The elder Fisher also watched both his sons help Newark capture sectional wrestling titles in '93 and '94.

According to Button, one of the reasons Fisher succeeded was a style that was both flexible and appealing to the changing generations. "He was excellent in teaching kids how to set and achieve goals," Avery said.

"You have to know how to promote their individual success, and different kids respond differently. He always crafted an approach for a different kid."

"He instilled confidence through training," Button said. "He made us train like we were going to perform or compete. When you got to the mat, you weren't awestruck. You weren't surprised to have to do something you hadn't already done."

Fisher was a master innovator as well, particularly when it came to the annual Newark tournament.

He was a driving force behind getting the Newark tournament finals aired live on television before it became more commonplace to see high school sports in that medium. Instead of large, cookie-cutter trophies, Fisher opted for medals. Another twist was Fisher's development of the spotlight ceremony before the tournament finals.

"Newark has had a history of successful heavyweights, but people would go home before they would wrestle," Avery recalled. "Jack's solution was to alternate classes, and we would have light then heavy, light then heavy. It gave the heavyweights the center stage before a main crowd."

He encouraged athletes to wrestle out of season and asked boosters to help raise funds so students could attend camps.

Fisher also developed the Pin Award. Every time they pinned their opponent, wrestlers would get a pin to wear on their uniform. Eventually, it was discontinued.

"You wanted that badge of honor," Avery said. "It was so successful, but some wrestlers would have so many pins, it would threaten the uniform with tears or holes."

The Pin Award gave way to a more maintenance-friendly ticker board — silver stars for JV grapplers and gold stars for varsity — that hung in the wrestling room for years. The board was discontinued when Avery stepped down as an assistant.

That board would have been full in 2001 and '02, when Jon Kelly and Eric Spratley carved their legacy in Newark wrestling history. Spratley holds the career record for wins, going 162-44. Kelly owns the most wins in a season, 44, in '01.

The 2002 Reds won Fisher's fourth and last Section V team title while boasting six individual champions.

Fisher announced his retirement at the annual wrestling banquet March 10.

"I read a speech to begin, and when I looked up after the first paragraph, every kid was crying," Fisher said. "It took me a while to catch my breath and go on from that."

Fisher is looking forward to spending more holiday time with his family — young Jack is a Marine Corps lawyer at Camp Lejeune, N.C., while Lance is a mechanical engineer with Secor in State College, Pa. — and more time as a whole with his wife.

"If not for her, I wouldn't do all this coaching all these years," Fisher said. "She is a coach's wife."

"His wife was always supportive of him being gone, and they are a unique combination. They make you feel worthwhile," Button said. "The time off will be nice for him. I'm sure there are a lot of things he's wanted or would have liked to do for years, but it was always about other people more than himself."

While Fisher will continue coaching girls tennis in the fall and may stay with girls lacrosse, he stressed that his wrestling commitment is finished.

His influence will be felt far beyond the recently completed wrestling season.

"I can tell you that he is probably one of the best influences I've had as far as coaches," Button said. "He was really on the straight and narrow and instilled good values. Once I got into the college ranks, only then could I really appreciate what he brought to the table."

"I think of him as being irreplaceable," Avery added. "There are so many memories, great memories," Fisher said. "So many people look back on jobs and they might hate them. When I look back, I know this is what I was meant to do. I loved it, but now is the right time to go."

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