



## ...On Home-Grown Athletes

By Bill Welker

**D**on't you just miss the "home grown" great athletes of the Ohio Valley, or any area for that matter?

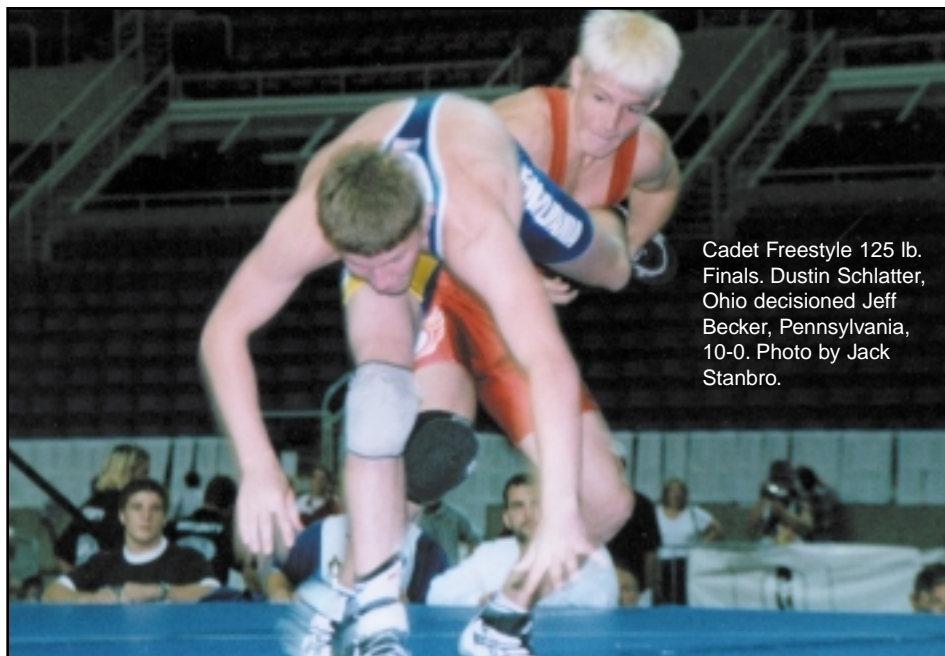
I am not a native of the Valley, but I love Valley athletics. I also know about home grown athletes who have made it big -- and made the community proud.

To tell the rest of the story, I must consider my entire past. I was blessed with so many great teachers in my hometown, as well as mentors I have had in the Ohio Valley. And as they say in writing circles, author your experiences; so here I go.

During the early 1900s, the little athracite coal mining town of Shamokin, PA produced Baseball Hall-of-Famer pitching great Stan Coveleski, known as the "Giant Killer," the New York Giants to be specific. This is much in the same tradition as Bridgeport's legendary Niekro brothers, Bobby Douglas, Martins Ferry's Lou "The Toe" Groza, and so many other Ohio Valley superstars.

I, personally, will never forget learning about Coach George Kovalick's 1959 tiny Bridgeport wrestling squad capturing the overall Ohio state mat team title. Wow! And they were all home grown.

With wrestling, the record in my hometown also gets even more impressive. Shamokin High School began its mat pro-



Cadet Freestyle 125 lb. Finals. Dustin Schlatter, Ohio decisioned Jeff Becker, Pennsylvania, 10-0. Photo by Jack Stanbro.

gram in the early 1920s. In fact, two Shamokin wrestlers were crowned champions in PA's first state tournament at Penn State's Rec Hall in 1938.

Since then, this small school produced 18 individual state champs. It's quite amazing when you consider the size of the Keystone state, and the many big schools that there are.

The state wrestling record book still ranks Shamokin 7th with the most state champs after 60+ years, including the first brother-team to win states in District Four. Furthermore, the school is listed as 9th with the most dual meet wins (591). And all the grapplers were hometown born and raised.

Today, times have changed. In the greed to produce great athletic programs at all costs, we have witnessed the phenomena of recruiting in high schools -- some dubious in nature, some under the guise of student exchange programs.

To my way if thinking, how could an athletic program take pride in winning a state championship, when the fans of the community have no idea who many of the players are?

I don't blame the youthful recruits, but I do shame the adults who promote these recruiting activities. They don't realize that victories, under such circumstances, are empty victories with little or no ethical fiber. What are their parents teaching them? I'll let you decide that one.

Unfortunately, the scholastic recruiting trend is growing in leaps and bounds all over the country. I think it is wrong. I, like so many other sportsmen of years past, take deep pride in competing as "home-grown" athletes 🏆

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