

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

# Founding Father

## Bob Wittneben launched a program and set the standard for wrestling

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SPORTS WRITER

**W**hen Bob Wittneben entered the high school in 1973, the Blue Knights were already established as a baseball and football power. Golf had already claimed its first state title, and softball was ready to launch a dynasty. Sports were already well-established in the blue collar town, but Wittneben had something else in mind.

He rolled out mats in a large closet and spent much of his day explaining the sport of wrestling to any one who'd listen. He scheduled split session practices to fit a whole varsity roster into the cramped room off the Derynoski School gym.

It was to a skeptical audience that Wittneben unveiled his new varsity team, but it didn't take long for people to notice Southington's newest athletic addition.

### Hall of Fame

"I was given a terrific opportunity. How many people get to start their own program?" said Wittneben almost 40 years later. "I was very fortunate because everyone was so supportive, and the school gave me anything I needed for the program."

School officials even scheduled an assembly so Wittneben could showcase the new sport at the school. Coaches began herding their athletes to the mat for off-season conditioning, and a few experienced transfer students popped their heads into team practices to throw their hats into the ring.

Wittneben didn't turn anybody away, and they quickly adopted his love of the sport.

He may not look like the prototypical wrestler, but the Long Island native grew up in wrestling's

eastern cradle where he rose to prominence as a captain and league champion. After graduation he carried his skills to Central CT State College where he dominated the gridiron in the fall and the wrestling mat in the winter. Still, nobody had heard about wrestling when Wittneben christened his new team in the Southington gym.

It didn't take long for them to take notice.

Jack Alkon was one of the first to join the program as an assistant coach in the third season. Right away, he was drawn to Wittneben's excitement and knowledge.

"He wasn't just able to teach the kids to wrestle," he said. "He was a very good motivator. He was always positive. He didn't have to berate the kids. He didn't have to intimidate them. He just has a strength that is contagious."

Winning wasn't the only thing. Discipline, practice, and effort were Wittneben's measures for success. His teams struggled at times, but it didn't matter to the young coach. His athletes bought into the grueling practice schedule and the challenging season, and the locals started to have some success against established programs.

"I was lucky because I had coaches that didn't put winning over everything else," said Wittneben. "They just wanted to build good programs. Obviously, everyone wants to win, but to what end? They were gentlemen, and they knew the game. They didn't have to yell and scream. They taught you how to do things. That's why I went into coaching. I was fortunate. Some kids aren't that lucky."

Wittneben followed the example set by his own coaches as the began to build a program around him. He stressed fundamentals in practice with a lot of drills. He enlisted like-minded assistant

coaches like Mark Mongillo and Alkon to focus on every wrestler. To hone his own coaching skills, Wittneben returned to the gridiron as an assistant football coach. In the spring, he joined the baseball staff.

"It was a great experience. I was always on the football field since I was a young kid, and I had the opportunity to work with some really good people there," he said. "Baseball was probably my weakest sport, but they showed me what to do, and I enjoyed it."

When it came to wrestling, he treated it the same as those other powerhouse teams. He never shrank from a challenge, and his fledgling squad crisscrossed the state to face anybody that would accept his challenge.

"We won a couple of matches. We got trounced in a couple of others because we'd go wrestle against a school that had an established program, and we'd get beat," said the coach. "It was still okay. We took it all in stride. Then, the next year we were at the high school with the auxiliary gym, and it felt like a huge showcase."

The only problem was that the team had to set up mats every day and tear them down after practice, but Wittneben wasn't about to complain. In just his third season, his wrestlers were already showing signs of success. At the 1976 Class LL championships, Joe Stevens rallied to a second place finish in the 167 pound division while Steve Fernandes scored third place as a 98-pounder.

The following season, his wrestlers scrambled for a conference title and a third place finish at the state meet. Three Knights medaled at the Class LL tournament, and Fernandes scored the team's first individual title. Wittneben wasn't satisfied.

"We talk a lot about those kids that really rose to the top and all their accolades and stuff, but behind those kids are a lot of other kids that also played in the program," said the coach. "You don't usually have 12 superstars. If you're lucky, you have a couple. Then, you have all those other kids, and they

make the team. You have to build them up in practice because you don't have a good team without good practices. You need the kids to push one another. You can't ignore one kid to focus on the others."

Then, in a blinding flash, his team came together as a unit. In just their fourth year of existence, Wittneben's 1978 team scrambled to a perfect, 17-0 record and toppled two perennial powers to win the 1978 Class LL championship.

"They didn't have a lot of experience, but they were athletic kids. They had a lot of determination, and Bob could make them work that much harder," said Alkon. "I don't know how he did it, but he convinced them that they could be champions. He wanted them to do their best, and he knew they could win it. He believed in it, and that made the kids believe in it."

If you build it, they will come. Southington's excitement started long before that championship run as the Knights began to draw unprecedented crowds. No longer did school officials have to lure an audience to a school assembly. Even on the road, Southington fans often out-numbered opponents.

"We sold out the gym multiple times, and Jay Fontana was ecstatic," Wittneben said. "He couldn't believe the size of the crowds, and they're still there today. That's the thing about wrestling. When you have that crowd cheering for you, it makes a big difference to the kids. I've been to some matches where the only kids there were the ones that were late for their buses. Not at Southington. That helped the program tremendously."

The excitement beyond everyone's expectations.

"I remember covering him when his wrestling team went over to New Britain to wrestle with Pulaski. They had some sort of a long winning streak with 46 or 47 in a row. Southington went into it

with no chance to win, and they did it," said former *Observer* sports writer Jim Senich. "It was one of the greatest sporting events that I ever covered...anywhere. It was just phenomenal."

No coach has risen as quickly to the top ranks. Four years after rolling out a gym in a closet off the gym, Southington wrestlers crowned two state champions and two runners up. Seven wrestlers scored medals and three went on to claim second place finishes at the state open.

"I'm no genius. I had good kids," Wittneben said. "I had a lot of support from the school and the parents with the booster club and the guys that worked with me. It was all about the kids. I expected my kids to wrestle hard. I expected them to go out and give me 100 percent. I didn't care if they won or lost. If they went out and did the best they could, that's wrestling. It takes a special kid to go out in front of his family and friends and girlfriends to wrestle."


Then, as quickly as it started, it came to a finish. At the end of the 1980 season, Wittneben left the high school program to pursue other interests, but he has never been too far from the mat. Wittneben continues to offer his assistance when needed.

"He's come down over the years in his free time to help show different techniques and things in the room, and I've learned a lot from his intensity," said Blue Knight coach Derek Dion. "He's been a great father figure for the program, and he's been a guy that I can go to over the years. He's a winner. It's in his demeanor, his professionalism, and his intensity."

Perhaps that's why the selection committee took notice of the former coach when they chose the Class of 2013. No coach before or since has been able to duplicate Wittneben's sudden rise to the state championship. No wrestling program has been able to duplicate the efforts of that 1978 team at the Class LL meet or the state open.

On Thursday, Nov. 14, Wittneben was honored with his 1978 team in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.





## Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Fredrick M. Gladstone Scholar-Athlete Award (Central CT State College, 1972)
- CCSC President's Award (1972)
- Founding member of the SHS Gridiron Club
- Founding member of the SHS Lacrosse booster club.
- Founded the SHS Wrestling booster club.
- CIAC High School Wrestling Committee
- CT Interscholastic Wrestling Official (1982-1997)

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SHS Coaching

- JV baseball coach (1973-1978)
- Assistant varsity football coach (1973-1982)
- Varsity wrestling coach (1973-1981)

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SHS Wrestling

- Founded the SHS wrestling program (1973)
- Overall record at SHS, 87-30 (.744)
- Ranked 3rd in percentage for CT coaches under 100 wins.
  - Class LL champion (1978)
  - Class LL 3rd place (1977)
- 2 League championships (1977, 1978)
- Undefeated season (17-0 in 1978)