

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

King Solomon

Brian Solomon launched a family dynasty

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

More than three decades have passed since Gary Solomon sat at the head of his kitchen table to celebrate his second state title in wrestling, and the story of that party has become a sort of legend in the Solomon family.

The high school senior had finally arrived. He'd finally stepped out from under his older brother's shadow. He'd finally proven that he was a better wrestler than Brian Solomon could ever hope to be.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the front door...

Hall of Fame

"I heard this rustling. I didn't know who or what it was, but through the darkness comes Brian with all this hardware," Gary said. "He had his duffle bag and all these trophies. When my parents left him at the college championships the day before, they didn't know if he would place or how well he would do. Not only did he do well. He ran the table. He won the New England championship. He won the most outstanding wrestler and the most pins in the least amount of time. Listen. If my party is going to get rained on, there's no better way for that to happen."

Brian Solomon had raised the bar again.

"That might have been the one time that I overshadowed him," said Brian with a laugh, "...slightly."


Few families have dominated the sport of wrestling as much as the Solomons, and Brian Solomon was the clear leader of the pack. He was the first to try his hand at the sport. He was the first to place at the Class LL championship, and the first to go on to college. He was the first to win the New England championship in college, the first to be named as an all-American, and the first to claim academic all-American honors.

If there was an award to be won, Brian Solomon was the first to get it.

"When it comes to doing anything, he only knows how to do it one way, and that's a disciplined, methodical approach," said his brother. "When it came to wrestling, it was always non-sense. He was in it. He's made a commitment to this, and he's going to do it only one way—all out. That really set the bar for Ricky and me. He set it really high with the way he approached it, his work ethic, his discipline, his passion. We wanted to be like him."

Solomon was one of the pioneers of Southington wrestling. The program was just a few years old when he came to the high school as a sophomore. He wasn't varsity in his first season, but he was on the roster as the Blue Knights rallied for their first and only state championship.

He cut his teeth in practice against state-level wrestlers. He served his time as a practice dummy for defending champion Jeff Lee in the 126 pound divi-



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Inside the Numbers

- Inducted into the Western New England University Hall of Fame (2002)
- Inducted into the NE College Conference Hall of Fame (2007)
- Placed 3rd at the Mid-Atlantic Wrestling Assoc. Championship (2007)

SHS Wrestling

- Overall varsity record, 29-11-1
- 2 Varsity Letters (1979, 1980)
- Captain (1980)
- 3rd at Class LL Tournament (1980)

RECORDS BY SEASON

1978—7-2 JV Record
1979—10-9-1 Varsity record
1980—19-2 Varsity record

WNEC Wrestling

- Overall record, 114-23-2
- New England Division III Champ (1982, 1984)
- New England Division III Runner Up (1983)
- Set career record for Dual Meet Wins (24)
- Captain (1983, 1984)
- Team MVP (1982, 1983, 1984)
- Academic All-American (1982, 1983, 1984)
- All-American (1982, 1984)
- 2nd at NCAA D-III Tournament (1984)
- 5th at NCAA D-III Tournament (1982)
- New England D-III Tournament Outstanding Wrestler (1983, 1984)

DUAL MEET RECORDS BY SEASON

1981—19-8 dual meet record.
1982—21-4-1 dual meet record.
1983—18-3-0 dual meet record.
1984—24-0-1 dual meets record.

Coaching/Officiating

- Asst. Wrestling Coach, Middletown HS (1994)
- CT High School referee (1986-1988)

sion. He'd wrestle up a weight class to face another defending champion or down a weight to face yet another. But Brian Solomon wasn't about to give up. In fact, he was studying the game and waiting for his chance.

"Brian just absorbed everything that he learned," said former Blue Knight coach Bob Wittneben. "He was very talented, very athletic, and he wanted to succeed. He picked things up really quick, learned things from matches, and just kept getting better and better. You couldn't ask for a better wrestler. He was always striving to be better."

So when an injury struck Lee in Solomon's junior season, Brian stepped in to cut his teeth on the varsity mat. He struggled to an 0-5 start before things began to click, and he entered the postseason with a .500 record. He upset a few kids in the early rounds of the Class LL meet, and went the distance against the top seed in a hard-fought loss.

Solomon wasn't happy with a moral victory.

"I couldn't do anything, but he couldn't do anything on me either," he said. "I walked off the mat a little discouraged that I couldn't score on him, but I remember Coach Jack Alkon

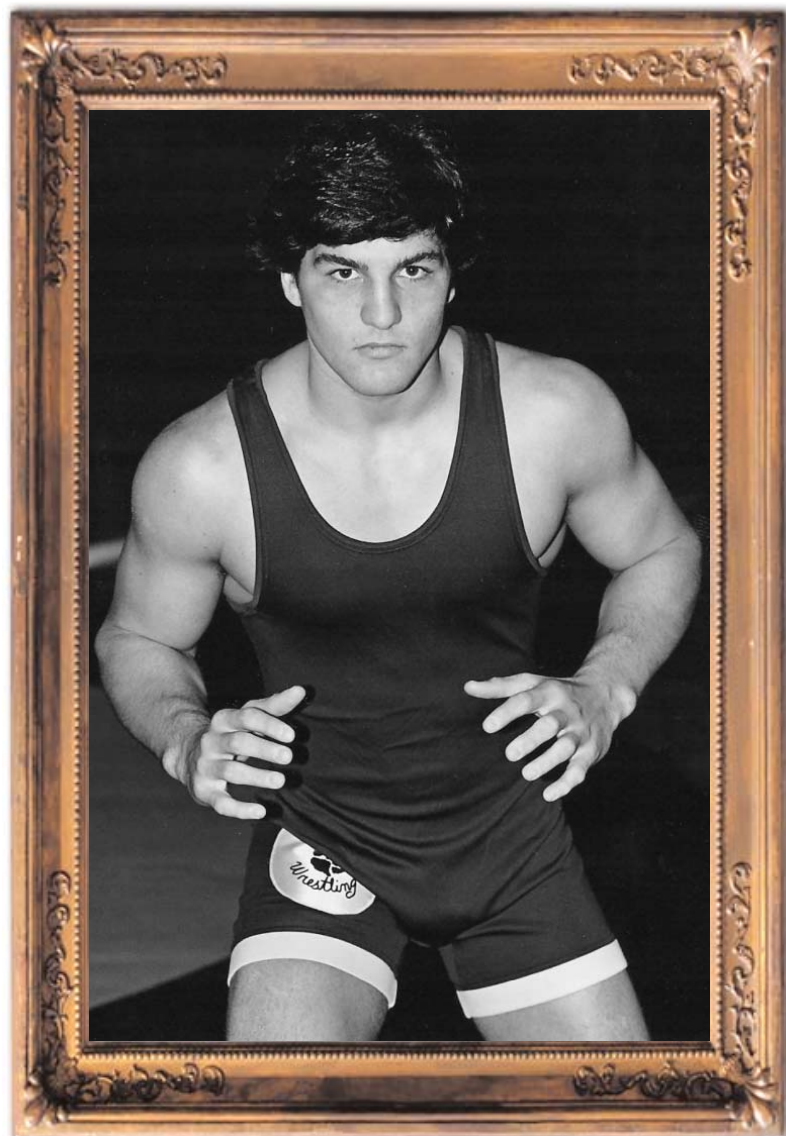
coming up to me and saying, 'You did great.' Did I? I kept it close, but I couldn't score."

The loss fueled his off-season workouts, and he returned to the gym, pushed himself in practice, and rallied to a 19-2 record as a senior on his way to a third place finish at the Class LL championships. That momentum carried through graduation as he walked onto the mat at Western New England College (WNEC) the following year.

"It was starting to click for me," he said. "I wrestled a guy named Mike Daniels from Bristol [for a spot on the WNEC roster]. He beat me 15-3 as a junior in high school. He let me up three times, and that's how I scored. When I wrestled him in college, I beat him and he couldn't touch me. Mike was a good wrestler and a good friend, but I was on the up-swing."

As a freshman, Solomon rallied to a 19-8 record in dual meets and it broke the school record for victories among first-year wrestlers. He set the record for most dual meet victories by second year wrestlers (40), third year wrestlers (58), and fourth year wrestlers (82) before he was through.

"Brian is probably the most intense kid that I've ever, ever



coached. Man, he is focused. He was focused academically. He was focused off the mat, on the mat. He worked hard and really took it to task," said former Golden Bear coach Bob Skelton. "I would tell him something on a Tuesday, and on Wednesday night he'd be doing it in a match like he was doing it his whole life. He made me look good for a long time. He was doing stuff on the mat that just blew me away."

It was his sophomore year in 1982 that Solomon charged into his brother's celebration with his first New England Division III championship (His second came in 1984). He went on to finish fifth at the NCAA division III tournament to claim his first to two all-American awards. He was the team's MVP in each of his final three seasons and earned all-American honors in all three years. He earned the nod as captain in his junior and senior seasons, and has already been inducted into both the WNEC and New England College Conference halls of fame.

"He had a sense of quiet, internal leadership qualities," said Skelton. "He led by example. He was the first guy to practice and the last one to leave. He was the first guy to run sprints. He was the first one to do anything. He was an inspiration to everybody, and it was just contagious."

As a junior, Solomon welcomed his younger brother Gary to his team and the sibling rivalry carried onto the mat. Their practice sessions would spill off the mat as teammates gathered to watch the brothers fight for the last point long after the whistle was blown. Those practice bouts were often more intense than their varsity matches.

"I wouldn't even go over to their side of the mat when they were training together," said Skelton. "They'd be slapping each other, kicking each other, and yelling at each other. Really? It was bloodshed."

The work paid off. Gary fought his way to all-American honors. Brian almost captured a national title. As a senior, offi-

cialists waved off two takedowns in the championship round of the NCAA tournament. The match went to overtime, and Solomon finished as the runner-up.

"It was a terrible call," said Skelton. "He got the takedown, got on top, put the kid to his back, but didn't get any points. He ended up losing in overtime for a national championship match, but he should have won."

"It still haunts me," Solomon said. "I remember who I was wrestling. I remember the move. I lost my patience. Instead, I went for a move that I shouldn't have tried. I gave up a takedown and I lost in overtime. I tilted the guy twice. One ref gave me two points. The other one waved it off both times."

Perhaps that's why Solomon stepped in when a controversial call ended his son's high school career. To help him end on a better note, the two registered for the 2007 Mid-Atlantic Wrestling Association (MAWA) championship. Solomon hadn't been on the mat in more than 15 years. He lost his first match, but he battled out of the loser's bracket to finish third against a strong field of college athletes.

"I remember my last match. I wrestled a kid that had just graduated from college. I was totally gassed. I was old and out of shape," he said. "I was talking to a father, and he told me that his kid was really good. He was in the 215 weight class. 'Oh, no,' I told him. I think I'm wrestling him in my next match for third and fourth."

Solomon won.

It was no surprise that the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose Solomon to be inducted into the local hall of fame. He was a leader in his generation and the next. On Thursday, Nov. 14, Solomon was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I think this is a tremendous honor because Southington has such a huge history with sports," he said. "To be mentioned with some of these athletes is an honor."