

Hall of Fame

Family affair

Gary Solomon anchored the middle of a wrestling dynasty

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

It's been three decades since Gary Solomon's junior season at Southington High School, but he can still remember the sounds, the sights, and the smells of a Guilford wrestling tournament in late December. Even his high school coach remembers the tournament, including Solomon's unlikely run at the title.

At the time, he was an unproven grappler that fought his way to the championship bout. He faced a senior champion from a Long Island powerhouse. Solomon stepped gingerly into the spotlight and never returned to the shadows. He and his coach both remember the moment as if Solomon was flipping a switch.

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"That kid just walked through the tournament," Solomon said with a grin. "He had just terrorized everyone, and I was just fighting and clawing my way through. On paper, I had no right beating this kid but he was my first real victory over someone I didn't think I could beat."

It didn't come easy. Solomon was knocked to his back for an early 5-0 deficit. He clawed and scratched his way to a tie at the end of regulation. They went toe-to-toe through the overtime periods, and they were still deadlocked on the scorecard. Officials had to turn to tie breaker criteria, and Solomon prevailed. In just his second season on the mat, Solomon had toppled a giant.

He was just getting started. "His confidence level rose about 300 percent after that," said former Southington High School wrestling coach Bob Wittneben. "He didn't think he could compete against him, but he went out there and beat him. That's what he needed. He needed to see what he could do against quality people, and it was fortunate that it happened in the beginning of his junior year."

Solomon wasn't bred to be a break-out wrestler. It wasn't inherited from his parents or drummed into him from an early age. Wrestling was relatively new in Southington, and there were no youth leagues or even a freshman team. There were no summer camps or booster clubs. There was only an older brother and sister.

His sister Sharon introduced him to the sport when she dated and eventually married a champion wrestler. His older brother set the stage for him when he took the high school team by storm. Solomon had grown up on soccer fields and baseball diamonds but cast aside his mitt for six minutes on the mat. He credits his family for the decision.

"I do everything that Brian does," he said. "He was my big brother, and he was into wrestling. I'd go to his matches, and I'd see my brother out there. He was a great wrestler, and I said, 'I want to

do this, too.' I wanted to do it because it looked cool, but I also wanted to do it because he was doing it."

Solomon credits sibling rivalry for almost everything that followed. His brother was the captain of the Knights when Solomon tried out for the team. Brian battled to 19 wins that season as Gary clawed his way to a .500 record. Solomon refused to let his older brother see him quit.

"I went out to each match with this mindset that I wasn't going to get pinned, but I never thought I could win," he said. "I spent a lot of time on my back looking at the lights, but they weren't going to pin me. My next goal was that they couldn't turn me to my back. Then, when I realized they couldn't turn me, I would look up at the scoreboard and think I could win. If you graphed my 7-7-1 year it trended upwards because some things were starting to click for me...but I was learning on the job."

Solomon threw himself into practice, attempting each move 100 times before taking a chance with in a match. He watched what he ate. He studied the sport. He conditioned himself in the mornings and performed pushups during commercial breaks at night. Everything was designed to build his endurance and strength.

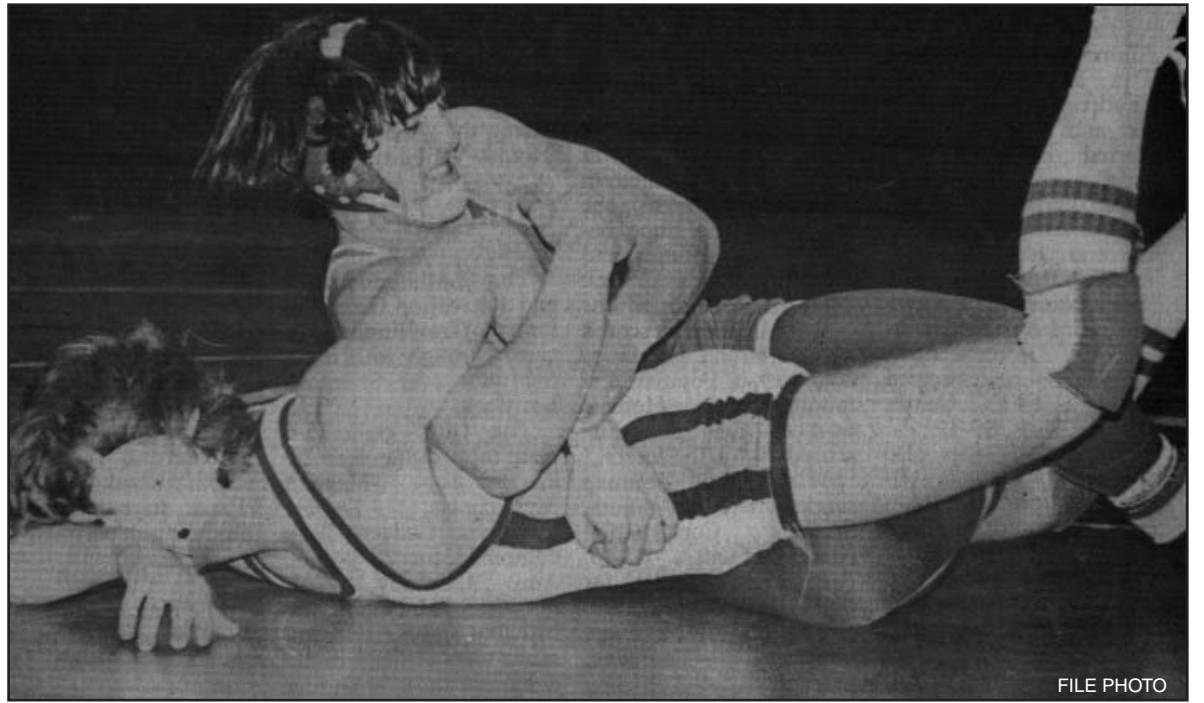
"This was just building my workout into my day," he said. "When I stepped onto the mat, I knew in my heart that I had done more duck-unders. I had done more double-leg takedowns. I had run more miles. I had done more pushups. When I stepped out on the mat, I was more prepared than you were."

The hard work paid off. Solomon lost just one regular season match as a junior, won the Class LL title, and finished third at the state open. He went undefeated in the regular season (15-0) as a senior, earned his second Class LL title, but injured his nose before the state opens. He was forced to wear a mask and lost to a kid he'd beaten during the regular season. Still, he managed to finish fourth.

"Gary was one of the greats," said Jim Senich, the sports writer for *The Observer* at the time. "He had skills, but he also had heart. When he went out there, there was just no way that he was going to get beat."

Solomon never forgot a loss. He followed his older brother to Western New England College (WNEC) but couldn't shake the state open loss. Once again, he clawed his way onto the varsity lineup. Then, when the chance came to avenge his high school loss in a regular season bout against Trinity College, Solomon begged his coach to let him wrestle with the junior varsity squad.

"I had to go into his office and beg the coach to let me go, but I had to wrestle this match because it was in my head for about eight months now," he said. "We ended up sending our JV squad and me. I ended up beating him, and it's become a sort of joke between us. Our record is 2-1, but he beat me



FILE PHOTO

Gary Solomon was a two-time state champion at Southington High School and a four-time all-American at Western New England College.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

•Varsity letters at SHS in soccer and wrestling.

Southington High School

•Overall varsity record 57-11-1 (167 lbs).

•Captain (1982)

•Most Valuable Wrestler (1982).

•Most Pins (1982).

1981-82—Class LL champion, 4th at state open, 14-1 regular season, 25-2 overall.

1980-81—Class LL champion, 3rd at state open, 15-0 regular season, 25-2 overall.

1979-80—7-7-1 regular season record.

Western New England College

•Overall record 98-17 (177 lbs/190 lbs).

•NCAA Division III/NAIA All-American (1983, 84, 85, 86).

•New England Division III champion (1983, 84, 85, 86).

•National Academic Award (1985, 86).

•Captain (1985, 86).

•WNEC's NE Division III Tournament MVP (1985, 86).

•NE College Conference Wrestling Association (NECCWA) Division III Hall of Fame (2002).

•WNEC Sports Hall of Fame (2003).

Coaching

•Wesleyan College coach (1987-90, 2010-11).

•Founded/Coached Middletown High School (1988-1996).

when it counted. He won the better match."

If Solomon was good in high school, he was great in college. He went 98-17 over four years at WNEC. Each year, he captured the New England Division III title. All four years, he was selected as an all-American. Twice, he received a national academic award. He was captain during his junior and senior seasons, and he was named to his college and conference's halls of fame. That didn't surprise his high school coach.

"It was kind of like a double-edged sword. Our kids didn't have a lot of time to wrestle in high school, but those kids that went beyond it really blossomed," said Wittneben. "In high school, Gary was a little more defensive. He'd set guys up and take advantage of mistakes they made. If they were a little too aggressive or came after him, he was able to use that to his advantage. In college, he was aggressive."

Once again, Solomon credits his brother, a two-time all-American, for his success. They became teammates, and the sibling rivalry spilled over into prac-

tice where they'd battle every day. Neither one wanted to surrender an inch, and Solomon said those practices were often harder than his varsity matches.

"He didn't like to be scored upon, so I would make it my goal every single day to piss him off. If I could score on him, that did it," he said. "Getting him mad was like putting a quarter in a mechanical bull. If you scored on him, you unleashed his rage. If you could withstand that flurry, you just withstood the flurry of one of the best wrestlers in the country. When I went in to my matches, I was finding that my opponents weren't as good as my brother...and they weren't as angry with me."

At the same time, his younger brother Ricky was following Gary's lead in high school. The three brothers amassed an unbelievable 161-30-4 high school record. Few families have dominated the local landscape as much or as long, and Gary was the centerpiece. That's why the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee settled on the middle child to pave the way into the local hall of fame.

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good, but Gary was special," said Wittneben. "He was a very gifted athlete. He was big for his age, and he was gifted athletically. He was intelligent and hard-working."

Solomon said he was humbled by the selection.

"There are so many great athletes that have come out of this town. The fact that I'm going in is great, but the fact that I'm going in for the second year of this just blows me away," he said. "I started wondering if they did their homework. Did they check everybody else? How did I sneak in?"

Two high school state championships. Four collegiate championships with four all-American seasons and two national academic awards. Solomon's coached at both the high school and college levels. He's seen success every stop along the way. It can hardly be seen as 'sneaking' in.

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Solomon will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville. For tickets, contact Jim Verderame, (860) 628-7335.

"I don't need to be remembered for anything, but internally it feels good," he said. "I conducted myself in a certain way. I carried myself in a certain way. I wrestled in a certain way to earn the respect of my peers."