

Paramus Catholic wrestler shows true compassion for injured opponent



Wrestlers are a special kind of athlete, and on a local level, that is never more evident than in the way they handle the competition, pressure and emotion at the NJSIAA State Championships at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City.

Sometimes there are displays of character that don't show up in a tournament bracket or result sheet. And that's exactly what happened after one consolation bout, which is worthy of recognition as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Series, presented by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

Every wrestler who qualifies for Atlantic City has hopes of winning a championship. If that can't happen, they want to at least finish in the top eight in their weight class to earn a medal.

Two of those hopefuls in the 165 pound division were seventh-seeded Daniel Rella of Paramus Catholic and 12th-seeded Anthony Lawrence of Christian Brothers Academy.

Rella, a junior, advanced after winning championships in District 6 and Region 2. Lawrence, a senior, was the champion in District 21 and Region 6, winning all six of those bouts by pin.

Lawrence won his preliminary bout in Atlantic City by decision but wound up in the wrestlebacks after a defeat in the pre-quarterfinals. Rella pinned his first two opponents before a loss in the quarterfinal round sent him into the wrestlebacks.

Lawrence pinned his next two consolation opponents, which led to a matchup against Rella in the fourth round of the wrestlebacks. And in Atlantic City, that's also the pivotal "Blood Round," meaning the winner is guaranteed a placement medal while the loser is eliminated. The pressure which accompanies that match is always intense.

"The best way to describe moving on to Atlantic City



is like it's a big relief, but it also tells you that it's time to make all the work count," Rella said. "It's exciting knowing that when you advance there, that you are among the top in the state. My goal for the weekend was to go down to AC and win it all. I believe in my training and my goal all year in practice was to become a New Jersey state champ.

"The blood round is the most exciting round at the states because it's time to make everything count," Rella said. "No one wants to leave with that thought of 'I was so close but didn't get it done.' It is extremely meaningful to place at the state tournament, especially knowing we are one of the only states in the country that has one champion and no divisions that are easier or harder. New Jersey has

some of the most talented wrestlers in the country and to medal here is a great honor.”

Rella was familiar with Lawrence, but they had never met on the mat before.

“We wrestled on the same dual team in middle school for Elite Wrestling Club, but he was one of the upper weights and I was a lower weight, so we did not really talk at all,” he said.

The Rella vs. Lawrence bout started pretty much like any other, with early action that you would expect from such a meaningful match.

But about 30 seconds in, something went terribly wrong.

Lawrence’s knee buckled. It turned out to be a torn ACL.

“I realized he was hurt right when we hit the mat,” Rella said. “I knew something was wrong immediately, because he was screaming and tapping me on the back to get off.”

Coaches, athletic trainers and medical personnel immediately came to Lawrence’s aid. All Rella could do was to retreat back to his corner, where he was left with a very awkward feeling.

“As soon as they stopped the match, I got off of him and went straight to my corner to let the trainers do

what they had to do,” Rella said. “My coaches were telling me he was definitely done, and even though I didn’t think he would come back, because it sounded bad, I had to stay prepared.”

It didn’t take long for the injury default to be declared.

Something that happens on the busy Boardwalk Hall floor, particularly during wrestlebacks, is that the mat clears very quickly after a bout so that the next one can soon begin. But Rella, even though he had another wrestleback to prepare for, wasn’t going anywhere as long as his opponent was still lying on the ground.

“I went over to their assistant coach who I previously knew and gave him a hug,” Rella said. “I said that I apologize, and he assured me that accidents happen and it is part of the sport.”

After that, Rella went over to Lawrence, who was still on the mat. He knelt down and gave his opponent an embrace. But that wasn’t it all. He helped lift Lawrence up to a standing position, and then helped carry him off the mat. It was a touching scene which encapsulated what wrestling competition and sportsmanship are all about.

“I felt extremely bad for him, especially knowing it was his last match in high school,” Rella said. “Yes, I wanted to win the match, but I did not want it to happen like that at all. I took some time to myself before my last match of that day to clear my head, because I felt really bad for him. It says a lot about the brotherhood in wrestling because we all recognize that we are working for the same goal, especially if you make it that far in the states. If you make it that far, then you know that the kid has put in some serious work into the sport. There is an immense amount of respect among wrestlers because of how grueling and tough this sport is.”

Rella’s conduct was no surprise to Jon Piela, the Paramus Catholic coach.

“Danny is a great kid, respectable and hard working on the mat as well as off the mat,” he said. “What he did at the state tournament is a true reflection of how well his parents have raised him as well as



Daniel Rella of Paramus Catholic wrestles during a regular-season match

Photo credit: Scott Anderson/NJ Advance Media



Daniel Rella

“Sportsmanship means a lot to me,” he said. “In the past, I had been known to freak out when I lose. I have grown in that regard, because I look at losing differently now than I used to. I now look at it as a learning experience, which makes me motivated to push myself in practice after a tough loss. But obviously something like helping someone off the mat is a show of sportsmanship and understanding of how much something like that can affect you. Even when I win a match, I try not to lose myself and go crazy, which I used to do. Being on the receiving end of that multiple times makes me feel terrible. So I thought about it, and I try to just shake the other kid’s hand and show him respect rather than celebrate.”

a reflection of the culture we preach at Paramus Catholic. We focus on good character traits, and emphasize that the little things matter in life. That moment when Danny carried his opponent off the mat in Atlantic City and when his teammate raised his opponent’s hand after his loss in the state finals were the moments that made me most proud as a coach. Yes, we like to see the wins and state medals, but when other teams post on social media that your wrestlers were inspiring and exemplifying honor, now that’s what coaching is all about.

“Character is who you really are and will determine how successful you will be in life,” Piela said. “When you have good character, you’re disciplined, you’re accountable, you’re coachable, you’re respectful and you’re resilient. Good character breeds success. As coaches, it is important to remember we are raising young men first, not wrestlers. Everyone’s wrestling career ends eventually, but working hard, being humble and remaining coachable never become outdated. We need to remind our kids wrestling is what they do, it is not who they are. Danny could of easily ran off the mat and celebrated that he had just earned himself a state medal by winning the blood round match, but instead he realized that his opponent had sacrificed just as much as him to try and reach his goals, and he honored him by carrying him off the mat. It actually brought a tear to my eye.”

Rella wound up winning two more wrestlebacks before falling in the third place match. He went home with a fourth-place medal and plenty to build on for his senior year, while giving everyone on hand a reminder of what good sportsmanship is all about.