

Officials Appreciation Week Profile:

Vinnie Russo

Wrestling has always been a large part of Vinnie Russo's life.

He wrestled during his high school days for Bloomfield High School, and in college at Montclair State. He then coached at West Essex High School for several years, before his interest took another turn.

He became a match official.

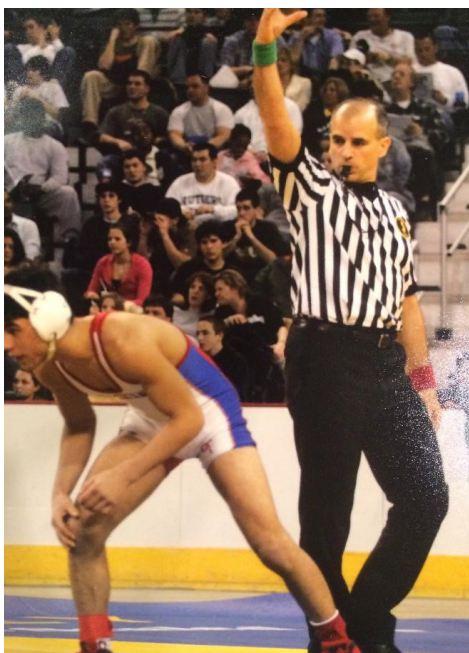
"I took an affinity to watching and observing all of the wrestling officials," he said. "From that point on, I became a wrestling official in 1982. I am proud to be a member of the New Jersey Wrestling Officials Association."

Over the years, he climbed the ranks to become one of the most in demand refs in the state, officiating high-level and intense duals and drama-packed individual matches, including state finals at Princeton University, the Meadowlands, and of course, Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City.

"I've worked 12 state finals in my career," he said. "That's the most for any official currently."

The tension in those bouts doesn't end with the wrestlers. The officials are a part of that, as well.

"People think it's easy to officiate a state final, and that is so far from the truth," he said. "I believe strongly that wrestling officials are just as nervous as the wrestlers involved in the match. It is a lot of pressure on the referee doing a match of that caliber, knowing that scholarships are on the line for the wrestlers involved, which makes a match like that quite difficult to officiate."



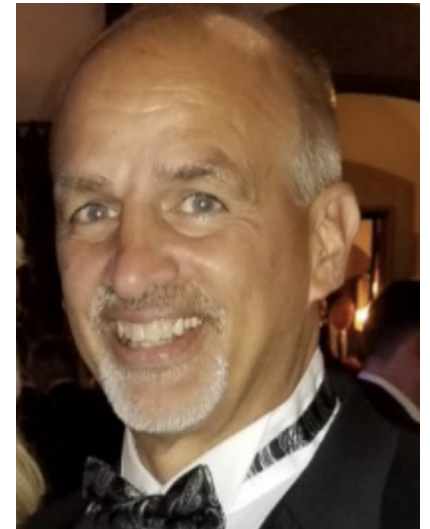
"As far as excitement, there is nothing like officiating a state final that goes into sudden death overtime," he added. "Everyone's glued to the mat, watching to see who comes out victorious in the overtime segment of the match."

Russo has taken a break from officiating matches the last several years, but is still very active as an assigner.

Getting know NJSIAA sports official Vinnie Russo:

What do you do in your job as an assigner?

"For my job as the assigner, it's a two phase position. I've assigned 100 schools in northern New Jersey and then I am also the NJSIAA assigner which entails assigning both boys and girls wrestling for the districts, regionals state tournaments and also all sectional and group tournaments."



What do you enjoy most about being an official?

“What I’ve enjoyed most was officiating some high profile matches and being afforded the opportunity to officiate the first ever Phillipsburg-Paulsboro match. It was a true North vs. South dual meet. The score ended up 27-26 with a fantastic Paulsboro win.”

Do you have a favorite memory from officiating an event?

“My fondest memory of officiating was when Blair Academy, ranked number one in the country, wrestled Saint Edwards of Ohio, ranked number two in the country, and I was selected to be the official for that match. Quite exciting to say the least.”

What’s the best part about any given day of officiating?

“The best part about officiating is being able to help young officials by teaching them at the Rutgers clinic, which I started 12 years ago so they can mature as an official and move up the ranks to achieve the assignments that they most desire. Helping brother officials advance to the higher level is what it’s all about for me.”

Do you have any memories from your first match as an official?

“The first match I ever officiated was for South Junior High School in Bloomfield. I remember walking up the steps to the gymnasium not really fully confident on how the match would turn out. Luckily, both coaches came up to me after the end of the match, and were pleased with my performance. Day one was a success.”

Do you have a particularly funny memory of an interaction between yourself and a player or coach?

“John Gill, the head coach of Kittatinny High School for many years, questioned one of my calls during a meet approximately 20 years ago, and I had to warn him for unsportsmanlike conduct as the rulebook calls for when a coach questions judgment after the match was over. Afterward, he came over to my locker room so I could explain to him the call I made. I gave him a Get Out of Jail Free card that I wrote on the desk in the coaches office that I was sitting in. I said next time you question one of my calls, and I’m about to warn you for unsportsmanlike conduct, you can hand me this card and I’ll give you a one-time pass. Ten years later, he came to the table again during the match, and as I was about to talk with him, and he pulled out his Get Out of Jail Free card. After that, I got inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. John Gill came to the induction and he pulled the card out of his pocket, which he had there for 20 years. It doesn’t get any better than that.”

What’s the biggest misconception about the job of being an official?

“The biggest misconception from both fans and coaches is that wrestling officiating is an easy job to perform. It’s quite the contrary to that. Whenever a coach does a wrestle off for his own school, he then - and only then - understands the difficulty involved in being an accomplished official. It takes years of experience and dedication to attain respect from all spectators and coaches. It’s not an easy job to perform, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.

What would you say to anyone starting out as an official?

“I would say to any new official that if you take your time and learn the rules and look at videos on YouTube of other officials on how they act and the techniques they use to call a wrestling match, it will enable you to pick up a thing or two month by month to become a qualified and respected official.”

***Think you might be interested in becoming a high school sports official?
Check out this link to learn more: <https://www.njsiaa.org/officials/become-official>***