



NJSIAA Hall of Fame event honors outstanding coaches

January 13, 2026

A crowd of more than 365 people gathered at Pines Manor in Edison on Jan. 11 for the 30th annual New Jersey Scholastic Coaches Association Hall of Fame awards event, which was held in cooperation with the NJSIAA.

A total of 52 individuals were honored, including the 18 who were inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame.

There were also five coaches who received National Federation Sectional Coach of the Year awards for their respective sports. A total of 28 other coaches received state Coach of the Year recognition for their sport.

There was also a new award introduced this year, the Bill Bruno Coaching Award.

Named in honor of the beloved NJSIAA assistant director and former teacher, coach and administrator who passed away in 2021, the award will given annually to a person who personifies Bill's positive, passionate and unwavering dedication to New Jersey interscholastic sports while fostering development of championship athletes, teams and athletic programs.

The first recipient of the award was Michael Smith, who retired in 2021 after coaching more than 40 years at Abraham Clark High School in Roselle.

The Hall of Fame has a long history. Its roots date to 1961, when the New Jersey Interscholastic Coaches Association honored all football coaches with undefeated seasons.

In 1964, the NJICA honored coaches from all sports, past or present, who had been nominated from their county by their peers.

Then, in 1983, the honor award program was renamed as the NJICA Hall of Fame, and included all past honorees.

In 1995, the New Jersey Scholastic Coaches Association assumed sponsorship of the Hall of Fame, for all head coaches among the public and non-public NJSIAA member schools.

The addition of this year's class brings the number of all-time Hall of Fame honorees to 1,906.

Adding to the prestige of selection to the NJSIAA Hall of Fame is that honorees are chosen by a committee comprised of their peers.

That fact is one of many prideful reasons cited by honorees at the event.

One such person was Shelly Dearden from Ewing High School, who made state history by coaching both the girls and boys basketball teams at her school to state championships. She added to that by coaching the Ewing girls soccer team to a state title during her legendary 30-plus year career, making her the only coach in the state to win state titles in three different sports.

“This such a tremendous honor,” she said. “It’s even more special that it comes from your peers. I’m lost for words, because I just did what I loved. I loved coaching, and being there with the kids. It’s all kind of amazing.”

Likewise, Stephen Fenton was overjoyed to be recognized for his long career coaching volleyball, 43 of them spent leading girls teams and three more directing boys programs. He’s won more than 600 total matches at Madison, Jonathan Dayton, Bloomfield and North Plainfield high schools.

“This is one of the highlights of my career,” he said. “When the letter arrived, it was a total surprise. It’s a great honor to be recognized.”

The final award during the program was presentation of the Bill Bruno Award. His wife, Jeannette, herself a respected coach during her career, was on hand for the presentation to Smith.

Smith did a bit of everything during his career in Roselle that began in 1976. He was an assistant football coach for 27 years, of which 25 were also spent leading the freshman team. He was the JV basketball coach and varsity assistant for 24 years, and spent nine years as head baseball coach.

He was active in other ways that earned him the respect of students and the entire community. He launched the Roselle Running Rams Mentoring and Counseling Developmental Basketball Program for boys and girls in grades 4 through 8, the in-town league for those who did not make regular league teams, and several other popular basketball programs which raised money to pay for sneakers, sweats and league fees while fostering interest and involvement in community-based youth sports. He was honored by the Mayor and Borough Council upon his retirement for his dedication to coaching and the Roselle community.

“I’m so humbled to receive this award,” he said. “I understand all that Bill accomplished and stood for, and it’s such an honor to be connected to that. A big part of what he did and stood for was working with kids, and that was something that was so important to me.”

