

All in the family circle for Edgemont wrestling

Six former wrestlers return as coaches to help Panthers win team title

By JIM MACLEAN

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From left: Chris Kim '14, Cliff Wang '17, Manager Maya Kai, Dexter Seeley '21, Pete Jacobson '96, Matt Lee '07 and Josh Zumbado cheer for an Edgemont wrestler at the Section 1 Division 2 wrestling championships. Scarsdale Inquirer/Jim MacLean

As the 145-pound final at the Section 1 Division 2 wrestling championship tournament was about to begin, a referee turned with a smile behind him to where Edgemont assistant coaches Chris Kim and Clifton Wang were sitting in the coaches corner.

“We finally found a way to make it official for you to have four coaches on the mat,” the referee said with a laugh.

In the other corner sat Edgemont head coach Pete Jacobson and assistant Josh Zumbado. The final bout was two Edgemont teammates wrestling against each other, so they were allowed to have four coaches on the mat at the same time, two in each corner. All day long the officials were trying to control the crowd that would gather in the Edgemont corner. The Panthers have seven coaches on the staff, and they were excited, as the Edgemont program celebrated its first-ever Section 1 team wrestling title.

Posing for a team photo with their championship plaque at the end of the day, you could tell it was a special moment for all the coaches and members of the team. They understand what it means to be part of the program, its history, and what it took to win that title. Jacobson wrestled at Edgemont and graduated in the class of 1996, and five of his current assistants are also alumni of the Edgemont wrestling program.

“To have a group of guys so unselfish and committed to helping kids reach their goals is pretty awesome,” Jacobson said of his staff. “The fact that six of us, myself included, all wrestled at Edgemont and are back to pay it forward says a lot about the culture of our program. Not only do they understand our program, they are all such great people. You can find people who know how to wrestle, but these individuals have the character that you want to be role models for your kids.”

In addition to Jacobson ('96), you had in the Edgemont corner former Panther wrestlers who are now assistant coaches in Matt Lee ('07), David Rice ('08), Kim ('14), Colin Hopkins ('14) and Wang ('17).

“It really speaks to our culture that all these guys that wrestled for the team at some point have come back to help and most of them are volunteers,” current senior captain Sander Miller said. “They don’t even get paid. They come out after their jobs and dedicate a large portion of their lives to help us. Each coach specializes in their own way, it’s like getting a private lesson from each one, and it really helps our program.”

Fellow senior captain Noah Bernstein agreed, and gave the assistant coaches credit for helping the team reach new heights this year with the team title. Bernstein, Miller and fellow senior Dhilan Patel all won individual titles and will compete in the state championships this weekend, February 25-26 at the MVP Arena in Albany.

“Edgemont wrestling wouldn’t be where we are without our assistant coaches, each one of them are truly selfless,” Bernstein said. “It’s very obvious how much they care about this program. It’s what our team is all about.”

Talk to the assistant coaches and you get a better understanding of what it means to be an assistant coach for their alma mater. Kim has been involved as a volunteer for several years and this year he became one of the two paid assistant coaches along with Zumbado.

Kim was a two-time Section 1 champion at Edgemont and he knows how much that team title means to the coaches who have come back.

“Even when I was wrestling we always seemed to be second or third and first was just out of our grasp,” Kim said. “I’m just happy and proud for Pete, seeing the amount of work he’s put in to finally accomplish this goal with this group of guys and coaches is definitely a special moment. Pete’s one of the hardest working coaches I’ve ever seen. He’s got two little kids at home, but the

extra little things he does for each kid in the program is amazing and it pushes us as assistants to give a little more effort to help these kids reach their greatest potential.”

Lee is one of the assistant coaches who has been there the longest, in his sixth year back working with the program. He points out what made the team title extra special to him and everyone involved in the program as it was an example of what they preach every day to the kids in the room —how wrestling is a team sport.

“The lengths that Pete will go to is kind of incredible,” Lee said. “When Pete asked me if I would help out I didn’t hesitate. Every year it’s a different team and a new season. I’m just grateful to be a part of this program and have it still affect my life. This year was definitely special, even when I was in high school Pete was saying one day we will win a sectional title and it’s such a gratifying thing to win. It feels even better because it was such a team effort. Thirteen kids placed, that makes it sweeter because every person had a stake in it.”

For some coaches, having too many people in the room might not be the ideal situation. Jacobson has decided to try a different approach.

Jacobson first returned to Edgemont for the 2002-03 season as an assistant for coach George DiChiara. He learned from DiChiara and took over as the head coach for the 2011-12 season.

Despite the intensity of this season as the Panthers had high goals and took aim at the team title, Jacobson could be seen calmly standing more in the background, letting his assistants take on more and more responsibility to help the program succeed.

“We’re willing to listen to each other and challenge each other to benefit our kids,” Jacobson said. “The buck stops with me, but I like to lean on my coaches for their input and feedback. If I’m a bottleneck then our program can’t be the best it can be. Our coaches have done a good job elevating our program. I think it’s important to hire people you trust and to give them increasing autonomy and ownership over what happens in our program.”

He continued, “They are here to help lead and make decisions. That wasn’t always easy for me to do that, but I had a great role model in George DiChiara when I was his assistant. He did a tremendous job mentoring and developing me. I can’t say enough about how much all of our coaches over the years have sacrificed for the benefit of our kids.”

The assistant coaches can go into detail about what Jacobson does behind the scenes. They can talk about the spreadsheets he created on each wrestler to highlight what they do best and what they need to work on. And right now the coaches have been busy spending hours reviewing films all week long on each possible opponent that the three Edgemont wrestlers might face up at the state tournament this weekend.

Most of all, Jacobson leads by example, and every one of his assistants will tell you that one of the main reasons they came back was to work with Pete.

Wang is the newest addition to the staff as he is just returning from college. He was a state champion for Edgemont in 2017 and went on to wrestle at Harvard.

“It’s almost absurd how much work he puts in to the point of insanity,” Wang said of Jacobson. “Now that I’m a coach I see what he does behind the scenes. It’s crazy, a real testament to how much he cares and the culture he helped build.”

Wang started wrestling in the Edgemont program as a second-grader. Jacobson was in his corner all the way until he won the state title, and now he is back for his first year helping out as an assistant coach.

“It’s not about wrestling, the great thing about the sport is it makes us better human beings, period,” Wang said. “I can’t even put into words how much this program has meant to me. Pete is one of the first people who believed in me through all the ups and downs. He puts in so much time outside the wrestling room to see that we’re doing well emotionally and physically. The

impact of this program is immeasurable. It was a no-brainer to come back. I just want to give back to the program and be around solid people.”

Unfortunately, the people and events that give you the greatest highs in life can also cause greater suffering and the Edgemont program experienced both ends in a span of one week. Just one week after winning the Section 1 title, assistant coach Josh Zumbado tragically and unexpectedly passed away on Saturday, Feb. 19.

Zumbado was also new to the staff this year as Jacobson hired him as one of the two paid assistants working with the program. He was a three-sport athlete in college competing in soccer, wrestling and lacrosse at Mt. Saint Vincent College in the Bronx. Jacobson had met him while Zumbado was working as a wrestling coach at his high school alma mater Salesian and they became friends. He was engaged to be married and the proud father of a two-month old daughter. He was working with the National Guard on assignment in Fishkill over the weekend, when Jacobson was given the shocking news that he had passed away.

As word spread amongst the wrestlers and coaches in the program, one of the wrestlers proposed a team gathering to be together for each other at a difficult time.

“With everything that has happened the past few days with Josh, on one hand it’s been uniquely difficult and challenging for me, for our coaches and kids who were very close with him, but the flip side is because of how tight knit our program is I think that helped immensely the past few days to make it a little easier,” Jacobson said. “No way to make it less tragic, but I found solace when we had a team gathering to talk through our feelings and memories of Josh and all of our coaches and the team were there to support each other. All year we talked about how we consider wrestling a team sport. We get through it together. To extend that, what we employed in the wrestling room to this real life terrible situation was a little bit of hope. One thing that came up over and over was how he always had a smile on his face and was so positive and energetic every day. In one year he made an impact on all of us and we’re going to miss him.”

Jacobson knew him from the wrestling circle and finally found a spot to add him to his staff this season, but Zumbado was new to the Edgemont program this year. One of the rare coaches who did not wrestle at Edgemont, you can tell talking with the coaches and wrestlers that he had already become part of the Edgemont family.

“For me personally, I’m amazed that I’ve only known this person for four months and it already feels like I lost a family member, such a big loss,” Kim said. “That speaks about his character and his personality and the great person that he was. He definitely made a big impact. He really cared about these kids.”

And those kids felt that. He was new to them as well, but you spend four months together in the wrestling room and win a title together and you’ve created moments that will last a lifetime.

“I practiced with Zumbado countless times throughout the year and got really, really close with him and all you can do is appreciate the time you had with him,” Bernstein said. “He cared so much about this team, just really tragic. He was an amazing guy, selfless, the best attitude, so excited at every practice. I really loved him and all I can say is I’m really going to miss him and appreciate every second I had with him.”