



BEHIND THE PHOTOGRAPH

By **SPENCER TULIS**
FINGER LAKES TIMES

It was less than two minutes into the first period of the recent Waterloo/Mynderse wrestling match when a fan from the sidelines yelled "Absolutely terrible!" and "Reminds me of the Pittsburgh game last weekend!" — referring to the mistake-ridden officiating in the NFL playoff against Indianapolis. He followed that up with "Run him out of town!"

The "him" was the ref, and his remarks left me wondering — as I often have — if that job is worth all the verbal abuse.

Wrestling is one sport where the fans are right up close to the action, and they never shut up.

At least in volleyball, proper etiquette means silence during serves; in basketball, it's silence during foul shots; in swimming, there's silence at the starts; and in tennis and golf, pretty much silence throughout. With football and baseball the cheering and heckling can get intense, but at least it's not right on the field of play.

In this regular column, a *Times* staff photographer goes beyond a typical caption to tell what's at the heart of a photo they've made.



The referee at the Mynderse/Waterloo match that Thursday was Ray Watt, who wrestled in the 119-pound division when he was a Geneva High School senior. Hearing what he's been through in the last five years kind of explained why he's beyond caring about a barrage of insults.

In May 2001, Watt, 46, was diagnosed with end-stage liver disease. He was at the bottom of the transplant list and given two years to live — at most. But he continued refereeing, something he's done for a total of 22 years now.

The year after his diagnosis Watt

was given a second chance. It turned out that his younger brother was a perfect match, so Ray was able to undergo a lifesaving transplant. The liver can regenerate itself, so Ray received 60 percent of his brother's liver, and it will grow back to its original size.

During his years of unhealthy lifestyle choices, the 5-foot-7 Watt had ballooned to 310 pounds. Today, at 180 pounds, he lifts weights, eats smarter and feels like he is in better shape than when he was in his 20s. His advice to others is that it's never too late *and* don't give up on yourself.

As far as the fan abuse, Watt doesn't let it get under his skin. The proximity to the bleachers does make it tough to completely block out the noise, but he sees a pattern to the comments. Usually, he says, the fans are wrong, and he finds that funny.

It is obvious to me that the positive power of loving and living life to the fullest easily defeats a few insults.

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