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## HIGH SCHOOL REPORT

# Art Connorton, a pioneer for wrestling

### TOM BATZOLD

SPORTS EDITOR

Whether they were his wrestlers, students, fellow coaches or just friends, most people knew Art Connorton as "The Bear."

As in lovable. Or huggable like a Teddy Bear.

The Hall of Fame wrestling coach said he picked up the nickname when he was an infant because he was "so huge."

Mr. Connorton was remembered Thursday as a man who left a huge mark on wrestling in Irondequoit, Section V and around the country. He died Tuesday after a long battle with cancer.

"We were blessed to have him in Section V," said Mark Hoyt, former Brighton coach and Section V wrestling coordinator. "He was a tremendous ambassador for the sport."

Mr. Connorton, 70, started the wrestling program at Irondequoit High in 1960 and coached there for 36 years. At the time of his retirement, his 301 dual-meet

victories were No. 2 all-time in Section V and in the Top 10 in state history. After winning countless coaching awards, he was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in 1999.

Mr. Connorton coached 34 All-Americans and three state champions at Irondequoit, including Tony Cotroneo, who capped a brilliant five-year career with a state title in 1981.

"I consider Art to be very instrumental in my life," said Cotroneo, a successful local attorney who stayed close to "The Bear" right up until his final days. "I've never met anybody as passionate about anything the way he loved wrestling."

At Irondequoit High, the wrestling gymnasium is named in Mr. Connorton's honor and the school hosts a tournament called the Art "Bear" Connorton Invitational.

"Naming the wrestling gym after Art was an easy sell," Irondequoit athletic director Dennis Fries said. "He was one of the



### Art Connorton

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finest coaches we've ever had here.

"He supported every team. If the wrestlers didn't have a meet, he'd be at a game, often bringing his wrestlers with him. Even after he retired, he was a constant figure at our games."

Arkee Allen, who wrestled at Irondequoit from 1990-94 and is currently the Eagles' coach, admits he tries to pattern his coaching style after his mentor.

"That dude could make you think you were No. 1 in the state, even if your record was 10-15," Allen said. "He made you believe you would win."

During his senior year, Allen said Mr. Connorton told him he was going to college at Colum-

bia. "I didn't even know where it was," said Allen, a math teacher. "But what a great choice it was. I wouldn't be half the man I am today without The Bear."

For the past 10 years, Mr. Connorton served as an assistant coach under Don Murray at Division III powerhouse SUNY Brockport. Only a few weeks ago, despite his deteriorating health, he was still critiquing tapes for the Brockport wrestlers and offering tips on moves they should work on in practice.

"We worked very well together," Murray said. "I'd push the kids very hard and Art would kind of put his arm around them and lighten the moment. If I was frustrated, he could calm me down in five minutes."

For more than 25 years, Mr. Connorton was in demand as a speaker/teacher on the national clinic circuit. He worked more than 400 clinics in that time, which Hoyt calls an "unofficial national record."

"Art has friends throughout the entire country," adds former Madison coach Frank Marotta. "Go out to Nebraska or Oklahoma and they know him."

Madison High's wrestling team was a frequent visitor to Mr. Connorton's Thanksgiving weekend scrimmages at Irondequoit. Once, "The Bear" spotted a hulking 250-pounder named Henry Hood.

"This guy needs a license plate," Connorton quipped.

And everybody cracked up. "My kids loved to go practice with Irondequoit," Marotta said. "He helped all kids, not just his own."

Marotta said Mr. Connorton used his connections to help some talented city wrestlers get noticed by college recruiters.

Mr. Connorton was quite a character. He could show up wearing a wig, a cowboy hat or boots, and would crack jokes to lighten the mood in a tough, gritty sport.

"He was big man but he was a

### Calling hours

The Connorton family will receive friends today from 2-4 and 7-9 at Paul W. Harris Funeral Home, Inc., 570 Kings Highway South (corner of Titus). Friends are invited to meet the family Saturday at 11 a.m. at St. Rita's Church for the Funeral Mass. Interment at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

big soft teddy bear with us," Allen said. "He knew wrestling was a grueling sport, but he made you forget about that."

Mr. Connorton passed away the night before the annual Section V Hall of Fame dinner.

"It's supposed to be a night of celebration, but it just wasn't the same without him," Hoyt said. "By the end of the night, a lot of people were talking about him, remembering something funny he said or did."

"The Bear was a legend. He was one of a kind."

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