

A Tradition Like No Other: WPI Wrestling

By: Tyler Marsh

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## Abstract

The Humanities and Arts Requirement was completed with a sequence of courses in history and international studies that culminated in a research paper in a seminar on the history of sports. The paper examined the history of the wrestling program at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. The paper represents an in-depth discussion of the program's history from its formation in the late 1950s to the current season in 2019. Coaching changes and team records are all highlighted throughout the paper alongside the team's successes and missteps over the years.

## A Tradition Like No Other: WPI Wrestling

It was early Saturday morning, crowds of fans began pouring in as the WPI Sports and Recreation Center began to come alive. The fans, a majority of which were sporting Tech's signature red, were there for our home opener, a quad meet between some of the regions best teams. As I laced my shoes up that morning, there was a palpable excitement in the air. My first college match, my first time in a WPI singlet. I came to Worcester to be part of something bigger than myself, I came to be part of the WPI wrestling team. However, as I stepped out onto the mat that morning, I did not realize how much bigger the program actually was, how important a tradition it actually was. I went on to win both of my matches that day, all the while not really knowing anything about those who came before me. Not knowing how the program came to be or the rich history surrounding the program. I knew nothing of the days of Alumni Gym or what it meant to bear our crimson and grey colors. That day was more than just a match. It was a continuation of a tradition set forth long ago. A tradition like no other, one of success, hardships, champions, and rivalries. The WPI wrestling tradition that I know and love today is one that is years and years in the making. From its humble beginnings as a club sport, barely recognized on campus, to the perennial contenders we are today, the history of WPI Wrestling is a story 60 years in the making; it is a story of great wrestlers, triumphs, obstacles, coaches, and rivalries.

Like all stories, wrestling's history had to start somewhere. In the 1950s WPI looked very different. Tech football and basketball dominated the sports world on campus, and a recently added lacrosse program had everyone's attention (Taylor 1937). Wrestling had not yet ever been introduced at WPI, but many schools nearby already had established programs like Springfield, Worcester Academy, and the United States Coast Guard Academy, and the sport was growing in

popularity nationwide (Scott 1960). In 1957, however, that all changed when two freshmen with previous high school experience sought to introduce wrestling to Tech's sports scene. Morgan "Moe" Rees and Al "Yogi" Johannsen first started to raise interest in a possible club. Moe, a student wrestler from Pennsylvania, and Al quickly drummed up interest among their peers but were in need of support from the administration and faculty. The two found that support in a new mathematics professor by the name of Dr. Ramon Scott. Ray Scott was a graduate from Lehigh University and had spent a lot of time around the sport of wrestling, to the point of being deemed a "wrestling addict" (Scott 1960). After meeting with Dr. Scott, Moe and Al were able to get the program's first faculty advisor. Along with the two freshmen and newly added Scott, Ev Angell and Ed Russell, two more very experienced wrestlers, joined the team as both participants and teachers, passing their experience and knowledge onto the other members. In that first year, as the program was in its infancy, the team had already grown to nearly 10 members. That being so, the team still struggled to become a club. Moe and Al, with the help of Dr. Scott, started organizing everyone in early November 1957. The trio held many meetings to help spur interest in the group, eventually attracting over 20 new members. Furthermore, the three also planned trips to schools with established programs like Coast Guard and Springfield, to both train and compete because there were no facilities to support the team on campus at the time.

The organization of the group was key to its survival in the early stages, but it was not until a couple of months later that the students were finally recognized with club status on WPI's campus by a committee of administration. On January 16, 1958, the story of WPI Wrestling officially began. The club, led by the trio of Rees, Johannsen, and Scott had a total of 30 members, covering all four classes, in its first year. Since the group obtained club status in

January, the wrestling season was already nearing its end- the season typically ran from November to February/March at this time- however, the team was still able to schedule some meets between some local programs. Three meets were scheduled, but the club was only able to compete in two against Springfield and Worcester Academy.



*WPI's first wrestling team, 1958 (Scott 1960)*

On Monday, February 24th, 1958, Worcester Tech's wrestling club competed for the very first time. The night featured a duel between the Engineers and local prep school, Worcester Academy. Although this duel was not official per se, the practice match was still officiated and followed prep school rules. Away, in the opponent's home gym, the Tech wrestlers were able to

win their first ever competition with a score of 63-26. Under the prep rules, there were to be ten bouts at weight classes ranging from 115 to heavyweight. WPI was victorious in seven out of the ten weight classes, winning six by way of fall and one by way of decision. Rees, one of the 6 Engineers to record falls on the night, did his in quick fashion, pinning his opponent in only 55 seconds. Angell was the sole winner by decision for WPI on the night defeating his opponent 5-2. The night was a great success for the newly founded club, even though the team faced a younger prep school opponent, it showed the team was capable of success and higher achievement.

A real test for the club, however, would come days later when the Engineers were slated to take on the freshman squad of Wesleyan, a well established, successful collegiate program of the time. On Thursday the 27th, the Tech wrestlers faced off against the freshman Cardinals in their own gym. Again, the dual was not observed as an official match; this time, however, the duel was ruled by college standards. The practice match featured eight matches, of which WPI only won three. Tech recorded two pins and one decision on the night amassing 15 points, but it was not enough as the club lost 21-15. Although the team dropped its second match, it again showed some hope for a successful future. As Scott remarked in an interview, “the club’s defeat may be accounted for in two ways. First, since they were not recognized as a club until more than half the season had gone by, they got off to a late start in practicing. Second, most of the members of the club have had little or no previous wrestling experience and little time to gain this experience.” Even still the engineers fared well, and the most important thing, wrestling was now on Worcester Tech’s campus. Even though the sport had finally taken hold on WPI’s campus, the wrestling club was not in the clear yet. Their club status came with a stipulation. The

program was on accepted on a trial basis and was to be reviewed after three years, or if necessary earlier. The wrestling program was being watched with a close eye. The next years would prove to be fundamental in securing a future for the program.

After the practice duel with Wesleyan, the team's first season came to an end as there was no time left for any more competitions. After the loss, Scott was already looking to the next year. Plans for building the program around the present group of guys were unveiled shortly after the end of the season. The team would begin its practices in early November, starting the season at the typical time to ensure the members' ample amount of training time. Furthermore, Scott worked out a full schedule of meets for the following season. The Council of Presidents at WPI even appropriated necessary funds for the club to obtain a mat so that some of the meets could be held on campus in the historic Alumni Gym- Alumni Gym was erected in 1916 and was host to countless sporting events for nearly a hundred years. From lively basketball games to raucous wrestling meets, Alumni housed it all, including some of the memorable wrestling matches the program has ever seen.

Year two for the Engineers did not go as planned. The squad opened up the season with a practice match against with a formidable opponent in Tufts. The team suffered defeat in the practice duel, but showed a lot of fight through to the end. Spirits were still high surrounding the program since Tufts was such a proven program, having finished third in the New England Meet the previous year, a tournament featuring the region's best teams pit against each other to crown a champion. Weeks later, on January 8th, 1959, the wrestling team took on the Huskies of the University of Connecticut in its first official duel. The engineers, again, showed a great fight. Of the eight individual matches of the night, the team won four. Despite their great efforts, the Tech

Grapplers managed to tie the Huskies 18-18. Hope for a successful season remained alive still because after all, a tie is better than a loss. This hope, however soon faded as the team fizzled out and lost the remaining six matches that year, finishing with a mark of 0-7-1. A positive of the second season, however, was Moe Rees' success in the postseason. Since the team was such a new club, WPI was only allowed to send Rees to the end of the year postseason tournament, the annual New England Intercollegiate Wrestling Association Tournament. Rees took the tournament by storm, after losing his first match he went on to outscore his opponents 17-0 en route to a third-place finish.



*Moe Rees pinning his opponent from Tufts in WPI's first home dual, 1959 (Scott 1960)*

In the years thereafter, the hard work put forth by Scott, Rees, and all the members of the squad began to pay off. The team's records improved greatly over the next four seasons. The Engineers were even able to register winning seasons in both of their fourth and fifth seasons. Also during this period, the club's initial three-year trial ended. As a result, an administrative group at WPI, known as The Committee of Presidents, met again to discuss the fate of the club. It was unanimously decided, however, that the club would remain active with school backing. Due to the program's continued growth and success, the club was approved for another two years where, when that time came, its status would again be reviewed. This just proved to be only a formality because as the seasons came and went, the team grew both in numbers and in popularity on campus. At the start of year three, Coach Scott opened up practices for beginners and thus, attracted a large number of newcomers, while also growing the team's presence on campus. The campus was buzzing with excitement, and the wrestling team was at the center of it. Student-run papers were running weekly stories in their sports columns dedicated solely to the wrestling team, covering the team's results, schedule, and happenings. One columnist even talked of attending his first match, "although we didn't intend to stay at the match, we became so engrossed in it that we found ourselves among the larger-than-was-expected crowd" (Scott 1960). The constant improvements yearly by the team and the back-to-back winning seasons in '61 and '62 did not go unnoticed by the Committee of Presidents. The wrestling team was also the only sports team on campus that bolstered a winning record. The once great basketball program was in shambles and the football team was struggling, as were many other varsity programs. When it came time for the program's review, once again, the decision was unanimous. The committee decided that for its sixth season the wrestling program was to compete under

varsity status. This decision was truly a culmination of the dedication that Coach Scott and young Morgan Rees put into the wrestling program. Even though Moe never was able to compete as a varsity athlete for he graduated at the end of the team's fourth season, this marked another chapter in the WPI wrestling story, one that would open up a new era. An era where the wrestling team grew into a perennial power.



*WPI's first Varsity Wrestling Team, 1963*

Before that era was able to take off, however, the team went through a rough patch. After becoming a varsity team in 1962, Ramon Scott saw much of the same success. The team maintained winning records, but by 1965 the team fell below a winning percentage of .500, a losing record. The likes of which had not been experienced by the team since the early days as a club. To add to the turmoil, at the end of the '66/'67 season, Ramon Scott, faculty founder of the club stepped away from his coaching position. Thus, began a period of transition years. The team

was being passed from hands to hands looking for the next Coach Scott, so to speak, one with the dedication and drive to take the team to new levels. In a five-year span following Scott's retirement, the team saw three different coaches. Initially, the team was lead by John Vino. Vino coached the team for three years from 1967-1970. He led the Engineers to a program-best fifth place finish in his second year, but followed that with an eleventh place finish in his last year. When Vino left, alumnus Leonard Polizzotta took over. Although Polizzotto was a talented wrestler and former captain, he lasted only one year, in which the team finished in last place. Richard Heikkinen then stepped in for yet another one-year tenure, however, the team faired a little better, finishing in 6th at the end of the year New England Meet. The program was at a low point and needed a leader to take control. The search for the next Ramon Scott came to an end, however, in the offseason before the 1972 season.

An announcement was made that Philip "Grebby" Grebinar was to be the next head coach of Worcester Tech's wrestling program. At the time, there was still much uncertainty surrounding the program, and the team had slowly faded from the spotlight, but what Coach Grebinar would go on to do for the wrestling program was unfathomable considering the previous short coaching stints that the program had grown used to. Even still, as WPI announced its newcomer coach, the wrestling story moved to a new chapter, one of an era spanning several decades that solidified WPI wrestling as one of the institutions most successful programs and as a perennial power.

In 1972, 15 years after the program's creation, Phil Grebinar took control, ready to see the program succeed. Things were slow to change, however. The team saw little improvement at first. In each of his first four years, the team had losing records. Competing with the opponents

of the region was no easy feat. Individually, however, some of these teams fared well through the years. In his first two years, Phil coached seven individuals to regional medals. The program continued on its up-and-down path; talent would come and go, but the team remained stagnant in its progress. Grebinar, however, stuck with it. His devotion to the program and certain longevity as head coach at WPI did not go unnoticed. In fact, it helped attract new talent and in turn, grew the program. The program grew and progressively got better to the point that when the 1976-77 season rolled around the team's fortune flipped.

In his fifth season at the helm, Grebinar led the team to a 14-2 record and the program's first winning record in six years. Grebinar and the team's scheduling changed slightly that year, adding more duals to their schedule allowed the team to accumulate 14 wins in a 16 dual meet season, very unlike the shorter seasons that the program had seen previously in its existence, which had typically only had around ten matches. The '76 season ended with four regional placers and two national qualifiers, the first in eight years. This season also ended with a Tech placement of 7th at the end of year tournament. Moreover, this season served as the groundwork for an explosion of success to follow in the coming years.

After that season, Grebinar and his wrestlers posted a winning season after winning season. The team posted double-digit victories 21 seasons in a row. This period of time saw amazing growth in a rather young sports program. From their 7th place finish the team jumped up each year finishing 4th just two years later. From there, each year, for six years, the season ended with the Engineers maintaining a top-five finish in the region, but never once could the team manage a championship run. In 1982, the team even managed to finish off the year ranked 16th in the country, yet still only finished as high as 3rd in the region- a testament to how tough

Northeast collegiate wrestling region is. Two years later, however, the program was able to bring home its first championship. Grebinar was honored in the process, as he was deemed Northeast Regional Division III Coach of the Year. Another two seasons passed and the team repeated. Grebinar had taken a torn team in 1972 to a championship caliber team in just ten years, where the team won two championships in the three-year span between 1984 and 1987. The success did not end there either.



*WPI's first championship team, 1984*

The team went on to maintain a finish of at least top four each year for the next eight years. During that time, the team secured two more New England championships, in the 1993-94 and 1994-95 seasons. Over the 20-year period, lasting from 1977 until 1997, the program was wildly successful under Grebinar. He put together a record of 313-56-2 in this span, maintaining a winning percentage of .844. Along with the program's four New England Championships in this time, Grebinar led four New England runner-up teams. Individually, WPI had 11

All-Americans, 29 New-England champions, 149 All-New England wrestlers, and 17 Academic All-Americans. This era of time marks the most successful years of WPI wrestling history, to date, while also solidifies the wrestling program as one of WPI's most successful teams on its campus. As with most good things, the run was nearing its end in the early 2000s.

In his later years as coach, Grebinar and his teams still maintained respectable records. Although some years were not as successful as others, the team was in a good spot. However, at the end of the 2004 season, Grebby announced he was stepping away from the head coaching position. Grebinar retired as WPI's most highly-decorated coach and was one of the relatively few coaches ever to reach the 400-win plateau in his sport. His final overall record was 414-161-7, which translates into an outstanding .717 winning percentage. As common with any coaching change, let alone the transition from a 33 year long Hall of Fame coach, the program hit a bit of a rough patch in the following years. And so, as another page in the WPI wrestling story was turned, another chapter, one of a new era, dawned on the program.

When Grebinar finally retired in 2005, an era of much success came to an end. The program went through yet another period of transitional years, much like the times after Coach Ramon Scott stepped away. The transition of coaches following Grebby, this time, however, passed from alumni to alumni, all of which were Grebinar trained. Sean Nelligan, a graduate in 2000, was the first to take the helm. Nelligan was a successful athlete, placing 2nd at his weight (165) in his junior season, and post-graduation he continued to stick around and was an assistant under Coach Grebinar for three seasons. His coaching stint, however, was short lived and lasted only two years. The team's struggle continued, however. As a young coach in a tough region, Sean led the team to 8 wins in his first year and 7 in his second season, however, both years were

losing records. The team also managed to place 13th at the end of Nelligan's second year, while not placing in the previous year. These two seasons also only saw two regional placers. In 2007, the head coaching position exchanges alumni hands again, this time to Lance Baden. Baden, a graduate of 1999, was a two-year captain under Grebby and a four-time regional place winner. Lance was even one of WPI's few All-Americans, the eleventh in program history, placing fourth at nationals in 1996. For the three years following Nelligan, from 2007-2010, Baden held the head coaching position. Unfortunately, under Baden the struggles of the team continued as the program only posted one winning season in the three years and placed only as high as 13th in the region. Even with the talented alumnus coaches from Grebby's years, the program was struggling. The numbers were down and recruiting was difficult. Again, the team needed another coach to step in and turn the program around. The program found this in yet another WPI grad, Steve "Foot" Hall. Coach Hall, a graduate in '87, was another successful wrestler under Grebinar, placing as high as second in the region and was a four-time regional place winner for the Engineers.

In 2010 when Coach Hall took control of the program, the program was very far from the prosperous years of the 80s and early 90s. However, the experienced coach had plans of revival in store for the wrestling program. Not only was Hall trained by Grebinar, but he also had the opportunity to serve as an assistant coach under Phil for four years. During that time, he helped the team a combined record of 60-1, three 4th place finishes, and a 2nd place finish. He also assisted in coaching two All-Americans, five regional champions, and 33 regional place winners. Hall brought excitement and experience to a hurting program. His focus coming in was about restoring the program to its tradition. With a new perspective on recruiting and strategic selection

of leaders within the team, Coach Hall was able to provoke change within the team and started turning the program around. Having a background in sports management and consulting, Foot was no stranger to promoting and steering teams to success. However, as with most changes, this process took time. In his first two years, the team only managed to tally only seven wins while suffering 24 losses (3-12 in the first year and 4-12 in the second) and placed 11th in the region each year. However, in those two years, he was able to coach eight individuals to regional medals.

In his third year, the region reorganized and a new conference was formed, the New England Wrestling Association (NEWA). This conference made up of longtime rivals like Coast Guard, Wesleyan, and Springfield is home to all of the division three schools located in the Northeast region of the United States. In other words, all of the New-England schools with Division III wrestling programs. After its formation, a new dual tournament was introduced pitting the conference against each other to wrestle for the number one rank, known as the NEWA Duals.

That first year, Hall and the Engineers finished 6th in the NEWA Duals, but still only managed an 11th place finish at the regional tournament- the regional tournament included certain teams from outside New England. At this point, Coach Hall had the team headed in the right direction. Tech finished the year just below .500 but had improved its mark from the previous years when the team only saw nine wins total in three years to have eight in 2012 alone. The Crimson and Red were not back to the winning tradition that the program enjoyed back when Hall was a member of the team, but a change was in progress and excitement was once

again surrounding the squad. With two young sophomore captains and other young studs, the team was primed to return the program back to its previous long-standing success.

The 2013 season was the turning point for the program. Headed into the season, the Engineers were already being considered contenders, seeded 4th as a team with six wrestlers ranked individually in the NEWA preseason rankings, the team's highest ranking in years. Although the team underperformed its initially predicted success, Hall still led the team to a 6th place finish in the NEWA conference as well as 8th in the ever tough northeast region. More impressive was the team's winning season record, the first seen by the program in 5 years. Moreover, the team had more regional place winners (five) than any of the previous nine years, dating all the way back to when Grebinar was still coaching (2003-04). After slightly stumbling the following season, recording an 11-13 mark and dropping to an 8th place finish in NEWAs, the team continued its upward trend.

For the next three years, the wrestling team ended each of the following seasons improving on their placement the previous year. In the 2015 season, Coach Hall's 6th season as head coach, the team finished 5th overall in NEWAs and boasted another winning record, finishing 15-9.

The following year was my first year on the team. I chose WPI not just because of its proven academics, but because of its recent success as a wrestling program. As described earlier, when I stepped out onto the mat that Saturday morning in 2016, I knew nothing about those who preceded me. I had no idea how far the program had come since its creation. All I knew was the program was having some success recently. My older brother was on the team prior to my arrival, so I had opportunities throughout his four years (2012-2016) to watch the team in action.

I was able to see the close-knit atmosphere and the continued upward trend of success. That is why I chose to be part of the Engineers. I could see myself thriving in a program like this. And so I joined the team and looked to keep moving forward toward mine and my teammates' goals.

That first year (2016) we continued to improve and bettered our past seasons. That year we finished 4th in the NEWA Duals, the highest finish yet for the program, in the new conference era. Although we only managed to secure a 9th place finish in the regional tournament, we had three individual place winners, one of which happened to be me, as I took 4th in the region. The program was finally back on its path, a path that was headed to continue the wrestling tradition on campus year in and year out. However, we still were not to the caliber of the nationally renowned teams of our past. That all changed the following year, however.

My sophomore season, the 2017-18 season, was one of the best seasons the program has had to date. The season was reminiscent of the glory days, the days when Greb led the team, when the program was at its peak. We started the year off with a bunch of veteran returnees and a solid incoming freshman core. We were ranked 4th in the conference and had eight individuals ranked in their respective weight classes to begin the year. We started off the year hot and as the season progressed we began to get national attention. After starting off 6-0 and winning a tournament, we were ranked 19th in the nation. We continued our success throughout the second half of the season and ended with a record of 18-4, one of the best records in the team had earned in almost 25 years. At regionals, we placed wrestlers in seven out of the ten weight classes. Moreover, that year we finished 3rd in NEWAs, 2nd in the region, and ranked 21st nationally. On top of all of that, Coach Hall was tabbed as the Northeast Region and NEWA Conference Coach of the Year. The 2017 season solidified the fact that WPI wrestling was back to its roots

and the tradition was going to be continued. The team had tremendous momentum behind it, but as the season ended news broke that Coach Hall was retiring.



*WPI Wrestling finishes 2nd at NE Regional, 2018*

After spending eight years as the head coach of the program, Hall stepped down. In those eight years, he had amassed 83 wins, including double-digit wins in each of his last five seasons at the helm. Hall coached three national qualifiers and 28 regional placers in his tenure. Instead of stepping away completely, Hall remained on staff as he handed the position to a fellow WPI alumnus and Grebby-trained wrestler, Matt Oney. Coach Oney graduated WPI three years after Hall, in 1990, and was on the team during the coaching combination of Grebinar and Hall. Oney had a wealth of coaching experience coming into WPI, but took on the role with a similar mindset and goals for the team: to continue moving the program forward and growing it.

This year, my junior year, coming off one of our best seasons, the team was initially ranked 12th in the country. Regionally, we were ranked second as a team and had nine of ten wrestlers ranked in the region. As the season is now nearing its end, we stand with a dual meet

record of 10-9, marking our 5th straight season with double-digit victories and our 4th straight winning season. So as the story of WPI Wrestling comes full circle, the team and I, now in my third season, continue to try to maintain the WPI wrestling tradition. The history of WPI wrestling is not finished and is continuously being written. This year is still being written. As a team, we finished in 4th place and placed five. I was able to become the program's first regional champ since 2004 and together with teammate Michael Curtis will be headed to Division III Nationals. As of now, the program is in good hands and we will look to continue striving for great success while upholding the long-standing tradition that is WPI wrestling. This year is not over and we hope to add two more All-Americans to the ranks of the greats that preceded us in this star-studded story. Next year will be much of the same. Our ambitions have not changed. We will lose our seniors, but a new class will step up keeping our mentality and our team on track, maintaining WPI wrestling's prominence both in the region and on campus.

Tech wrestling is a long and great tradition, and like most, the program has inevitably had its ups and downs yet the team is one of the most prominent Northeast Division III teams, year-in and year-out, currently thanks to the foundations of the groundwork set forth many years ago by those who wore the crimson and grey before my teammates and me. Sixty-one years ago, with a dream of continuing a sport they grew up with, two students and a professor started a club that became the basis for what WPI wrestling is today. The foundation from which this program was built is crucial in the team's success today. The WPI Wrestling program is the most successful athletics program in the university's history. With a 499-286-11 (.634) overall record, the numbers speak to our sustained success. It is because of this success and the tradition of WPI wrestling that a bond between all of those who join, past, present, and future, is created. That

bond is a family of alumni who support each other and the team. Alumni presence can be seen in all shapes and sizes throughout the program. Whether it be the alumni head coaches, the financial support from wrestlers of the past, or even volunteer alumni coaches who come back year after year to help make the team better each offseason. WPI wrestling is a special group and a tradition like no other.

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