

Lake Highland Prep's Mike Palazzo

According to Mike Palazzo, head coach of the Lake Highland Prep (Florida) team that has been ranked in the nation's top ten for the past decade, said he has a "wrestling is life" perspective.

"I grew up a wrestler," he said. "Wrestling taught me about life. You become something, not get something. 'Every day, I remind my athletes: 'From the time you wake up, you are a wrestler.' A wrestler – our wrestlers – can never afford to be average. To succeed in today's world of wrestling, you have to be an exceptional athlete who has all of his or her life in alignment.'"

Following a match or tournament, "the next day we are back to work, regardless of standing or place. Although our team and individual goals are to be No. 1, the process is what's most important. We will not be champions again unless we add another five-pound plate to our training."

Leading a program that has won 10 state team titles in 20 years, Palazzo – now in his 13th season at the helm – welcomed a new challenge this season when his Orlando private school joined the National Prep Network. Self-described as "hyper-competitive," Palazzo believes that "kids without driving forces will never experience excellence. Admission to this school is so difficult; what got us where we are is hard work, not recruiting. We put school first because the sport grows first through a commitment to academics."



Mike Palazzo

As a program with resources and the full backing of the institution, Palazzo feels "blessed to be able to train and compete at any level." LHP aims to develop "pillars of the community, ones who give back. Wrestling is an opportunity for our kids to be the best examples of what you can become in life."

This year, in the absence of a National Prep School Championship, he brought 25 middle and high school wrestlers to the best competition he could find, RMN Events' Rumble in Arizona, where Wyoming Seminary was one of 28 high school dual teams and over 2,000 individual wrestlers.

"We were very excited for our first RMN event. It's really remarkable what the Gutierrez family has done to hold a competitive event under the present circumstances. As we were looking to add grease to the wheels, the Rumble is exactly what we needed. Humility is what keeps us alive."

Following Lake Highland's well-earned 1st-place team duals victory over Seminary, Mike reflected: "It was not exactly the win we ultimately seek, given the school/club structure brought on by COVID, but for sure a prelude of what I am confident is yet to come."

"There are so many great programs out there; thus, we need to keep working hard, as it will never be easy to compete at this level in any regard. Chasing the biggest goals requires a more committed process which ultimately means the biggest of benefits, win or lose."

"If wrestling does not change lives," concludes Palazzo, "there is no reason for our sport. Together, through commitment and heart, wrestling gives meaning and purpose to life." ■

By Bill X Barron

RMN Events star Andrew Donahue

Andrew Donahue, whose mother used to take him for Krispy Kreme donuts after wrestling camp, asserts, "Life is more than a wrestling match. Kids get too wrapped up in the moment. Relax, open up. It's not going to define the rest of your life."

A native of Ohio and a member of Wyoming Seminary's 2020 National Prep School Championship team in Pennsylvania, Andrew dominated the 170-pound class as a sophomore with three falls, including a 44-second pin in the finals. Both Andrew and Sem coach Scott Green concur that it's their team's "sense of camaraderie" that breeds champions.

Back in 2012, as part of an undefeated 56-0 season as a ten-year-old, Andrew earned the elite RMN Events Triple Crown, where a wrestler must win two RMN tournaments in the same weight in addition to capturing the title at the RMN National Championships. His season was featured in the RMN Events News under the title "Suffer Now: Mantra of a Champion."

So taken were they by this experience that Andrew and his father felt the need to give back by voluntarily manning a mat table for several hours. At those same March 2012 RMN Nationals, his dad Michael still relives a defining moment in the semis where Andrew moved up a weight to challenge for his second Triple Crown against a tough Tulsa rival.

"When Andrew and I looked at the clock, it showed six seconds left and we were down by one," Green said. "On the way back to the middle, I reminded he had already won a Triple Crown that day, so this was just a bonus."

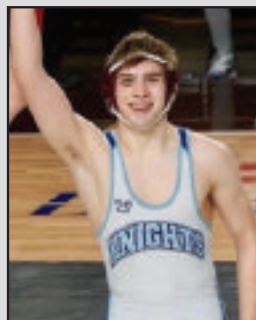
"Knowing he had been practicing a Granby, this was the time to kill one. Our little sign for the Granby was to circle my finger like the injury motion, only in the vertical plane. At the buzzer, the referee hesitated, then put up the signal for a 1-point escape."

"Within 15 seconds of the start of overtime, it was over! Andrew had shot in hard, executing his favorite head inside single-leg move. With a hard sprawl, he quickly slammed his right hip down, right elbow to the mat, then ran his feet around the corner."

Andrew is a cerebral wrestler who has never relied upon strength, even as he has grown to the 182-pound class this year.

Viewing a wrestling competition as a chess match, Andrew "lays back, waiting for my opponent to make a mistake. If I pressure too hard, I open myself up to attack. I let him wear himself out, then look to seize the advantage in the third period when he begins to tire."

In a December 2012 RMN Events interview, Andrew cited: "I dread every minute of training, but I replay a Muhammad Ali quote that my mom used for our North Carolina wrestling club: 'Suffer now and live the rest of your life like a champion.' On the mat, there is no place to cover up or hide." ■



Andrew Donahue

Wyoming Seminary's Scott Green

Student-athletes who join a prep school community must embrace the multidimensional facets of their overall commitment. Founded in the pre-Civil War era (1844), Wyoming Seminary of Kingston, Pa., "dares to teach our students to honor and strive for the true, the beautiful, and the good."

Coach Scott Green joined Seminary's faculty eleven years ago as an English teacher and admissions counselor, in addition to coaching and dormitory responsibilities. He enjoys "full involvement in a community where I can help young adults develop into future citizens of the world."

Under Coach Green, "Sem" has returned to its traditional role atop the prep school wrestling world. The wrestling team won its first National Prep School Championship in 1937, as well as 1947, 1948, and 1952. But not until Scott's arrival did they bring home the title again, both in 2014 and 2020.

Green stresses that students who succeed at the Seminary must embrace a direction that will "alter the course of your life" in a place where, in the true meaning of seminary, the founders envisioned that "young people would come together from all over the world to celebrate fellowship."

"Championships are a product of living and training to certain values, then won through focusing on the larger picture. We have a team-first mindset where everyone has each other's best interests at heart."

At Seminary, there are no designated captains. "The qualities one sees in a captain, we should see in everyone. Through shared leadership, we are stakeholders of this team. There's no pressure on one individual to do it all; everyone is accountable. We are all in this together."

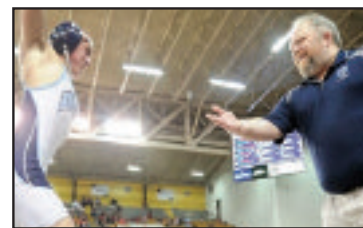
How would you recognize a Wyoming Seminary wrestler who was not wearing the team singlet?

"He will be calm and collected," states Sem wrestler Andrew Donahue. "It is less in how a Seminary kid wrestles, and more in the person he is off the mat. He is articulate when talking with you and able to break down the match."

Coach Green reflects that "our wrestlers carry themselves with a love of the sport, mirrored in the way they are competing with passion and commitment. On the mat, we are the best at getting to the corner and in taking advantage of opponents when they are on the bottom. We map out offensive positions so as to be in the most competitive position."

Parent Michael Donahue comments on Coach Green's "influence on the camaraderie of the whole team. He has established a unified direction fostered by an overall enthusiastic and supportive team network. He avoids politics with parents and devotes a hundred percent of his focus to the kids. Coach keeps a smile on everyone's face, he's also managing stress levels in between competition against the best kids in the country."

Scott admits that the prep school path is "not for everyone. You have to ask for the school to be a partner in your education. The true pay-off is when a kid gets into the college of his choice. I have the satisfaction of knowing that I guided them in a journey that is reinforced when success at the higher level culminates in a college degree." ■



Scott Green (right)