



2002 HIGH SCHOOL COACH-OF-THE-YEAR

Ben Tomes

Milwaukee Custer High School, Wisconsin

Editor's Note: The selection of the High School Coach of the Year is always a difficult task. The hundreds of nominations we have received over the years have all been for outstanding coaches, some of them nominated because of a long and successful career. The Coach-of-the-Year Award, however, is not based on longevity. It is the honoring of a coach for a significant accomplishment during the season just completed, often against considerable odds or in spite of significant hardship. Obviously, excellence over time is also a consideration. - Cal Johnson

Milwaukee Custer High School (WI) is considered by many to be one of the most challenging schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools system. Prior to three years ago the MC wrestling program had been non-existent for five years and weak for a number of years before that.

Enter Mr. **BEN TOMES**, and the resurrection begins. After a 1999-2000 season as part of a co-operative program with Milwaukee North, the MC program began to improve. The 2000-2001 season, on its own merit as an independent program, saw the school field a full thirteen-member varsity team and win the Homestead Regional. The team also hosted its first home meet in eight years, wrestling in front of a packed gym of spectators.

A coach at Milwaukee Custer is in regular contact with the foster care system, group homes, juvenile facilities and probation departments. Many team members have learning, cognitive, or emotional disabilities. In many cases parents have never seen their child wrestle, and there is no booster club to help fund a program with a \$400 per year budget. Coach Tomes, who is a special education teacher at Milwaukee Custer, is able to motivate his wrestlers and get them to work hard on the mat and in school.

The results have been phenomenal. This year MC finished first in both the dual



meet and city conference tournament championships. The team fashioned an 11-4 dual record and ended Milwaukee Pulaski's eight-year run as city champions. Forty wrestlers finished the season, only one a senior. The varsity squad fashioned an overall match record of 322-114, a .758 percentage. Ten wrestlers finished with twenty or more wins.

Even more remarkable was the academic and social success of the team. In a school where the current graduation rate is 38%, Milwaukee Custer wrestlers are learning to excel in the classroom. Several MC wrestlers have gone from ineligible status and nearly zero grade point averages to honor role students. In a school with average attendance of 63%, wrestling team attendance is above 95%. Last year three members of the team made Academic All-State.

Tomes also founded an off-season wrestling club that draws wrestlers from the heart of Milwaukee's central city. Two wrestlers from that club made the Wisconsin National Freestyle/Greco Team

that competed in Fargo last summer.

Coaches have the ability to effect lives. Ben Tomes has certainly done that. It is impossible in this limited space to list all the comments of the people whose lives he has touched. Two such comments will summarize well.

C.J. Davis, the only senior on the 2001-2002 team, says of Tomes, "Coach Tomes sacrificed so much for this team. He was such an inspiration to me as a coach. He made wrestling more than a sport, he made it a way of life. There are so many things that you can incorporate with wrestling into your daily life. It took me some time to understand this. He is like a second father to me."

Roger Quindel, a Milwaukee County Supervisor who is chair of Milwaukee County's Health and Human Needs Committee, nominated Ben. It is through that position that he became aware of the work Tomes does with inner city youth. Says Quindel, "Coach Tomes is proving to the wrestling world that there is a strong interest in wrestling within our biggest cities, and that the young men of the city need the values wrestling brings, and that wrestling needs the qualities and diversities that big cities hold. There is no more deserving candidate for Coach of the Year than Mr. Benjamin Tomes."

Wrestling USA Magazine salutes a man who has the dedication to change the course of young lives.

RUNNER-UP

Jim Husk
Miami Southridge HS
Miami, FL
573-65-4 record
60 State Champs

Nominated by
Stuart Mahler

