



## Al Bevilacqua New York

**A**l Bevilacqua has been actively involved in the sport of wrestling since 1953 when he met the legendary Sprig Gardner, Distinguish Member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame from Mephram High School on Long Island.

During the 1950s Long Island was rapidly growing following World War II from a farm community to a suburb of New York City. There were 13 high schools on Long Island at the time and within 5 years there were fifty. There are now 110 high schools in two counties, Nassau and Suffolk. All but 7 schools have high school wrestling, and they are on the extreme eastern end of the Island with very small enrollments.

Sprig would visit all of the new schools bringing his team to each school and during assembly periods began selling the student body and the administration on adding wrestling to their inter-scholastic program. It was there that Al was hooked on wrestling. He has not stopped selling wrestling to everyone he's met since.

In 1973, Al was selected by Steve Combs Executive to be the state co-chairman, along with Jack Stanbro, for New York State. He began converting Long Island from its support of the AAU to the support of the United States Wrestling Federation. He did it the only way he knew how, the same way Sprig did it, and that was to visit each of the 100 high school coaches on Long Island selling the Federation movement.

The effort obviously worked because today the only national organization that sponsors wrestling clubs, memberships and tournaments on Long Island is USA Wrestling. Of the 8000 kids who wrestle in Kids, Junior and Senior school programs almost half of them are USAW



members.

His support and love of the organization convinced him to leave as Head Coach of Hofstra University as he believed he could help wrestling more by working for the Federation than being the head coach at Hofstra. He applied for a leave of absence from his teaching position and left for Stillwater, Oklahoma, with his wife and six children.

He returned to Long Island in 1980 and continued volunteering for USA Wrestling, now the national governing body of the sport. He was one of the witnesses in the suit vs. the AAU and continues until this day promoting USA Wrestling programs. He was a Board member for 12 years. In Budapest, Hungary at the 1986 FILA Congress, he was there to witness with Werner Holzer and Vince Zuaro the election of USA Wrestling as the official National

Governing Body for the United States and member of FILA. Many people who are actively with the organization even now, never thought that this would ever happen.

As a member of the Metropolitan Wrestling Association under the strong leadership of Setrak Agonian, Al helped to sell NYC2012 and USAW by having New York City host the 2001 World Championships. When the tragic events of 9/11 occurred canceling the 2001 World Championships, he turned his attention to the 2003 World's under the same plan. People throughout the world consider the 2003 World Championships the best ever. It was held at Madison Square Garden, the World's Most Famous Arena, and Al helped attract 12,500 fans to the finals.

He has not stopped selling wrestling and is now embarking on his last major sale, to bring amateur wrestling to the large urban inner cities of the United States. Operating from a \$30,000 grant from USA Wrestling and with Bill Crum, MWA Executive Director, he is doing what he has always done, meeting with school principals, athletic directors, PTAs, NYC Parks Department, PALs, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Club members selling wrestling to the 1.1 million in the public school and 250,000 private and parochial school kids. He used his long time connections in the wrestling community and quickly raised the necessary capital to get the project started by approaching a few of his former Massapequa HS students and club members. His two sons, Chris and Michael and an extended son, Billy Baldwin, have encouraged him to finish the race. He is finishing the race of trying to make wrestling a mainstream sport.

Sprig would be proud!