



PHOTOGRAPHER-OF-THE-YEAR

VALERIE SMITH Parkersburg, West Virginia

When Valerie Smith's youngest son Chris was born, her husband Brian pulled out his old Canon AE1 SLR camera for her to use. A subsequent move to the mountain community of Canaan Valley, West Virginia provided Valerie the opportunity to take her camera along on her daily hikes to capture the unspoiled beauty of the area. The Smiths moved back to their current home of Parkersburg, West Virginia, and Valerie's older son Brandon began wrestling. As lots of parents do, Valerie faithfully filmed Brandon's matches. But when the camcorder broke, she got out the camera and began taking pictures rather than purchasing a new camcorder. And so began Valerie Smith's adventure with wrestling photography.

Valerie began getting more serious with her photography in 1998 when Brandon and Chris started competing in the Eastern Nationals. She quickly discovered that taking pictures of her sons' teammates was a great way to get better at taking pictures of her own kids. She was still using film at the time, so whenever she got pictures developed, she'd get extra copies and give them to the other kids free of charge. She took her hobby to a new level when she purchased a Canon Digital Rebel XT in 2005, which allowed her to take even more photos of the boys and their teammates. And of course, that meant she had even more photos of teammates to distribute to families. At the time, she didn't know how much those photos would come to be cherished until tragedy struck the area wrestling community in the spring of 2006, when one of Chris' teammates was killed in an automobile accident just two months after wrestling season ended. Valerie had over 200 candid photos of the boy from the wrestling season, so she decided to make a CD for his mother. She also made CDs for the boys on the wrestling team. After



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that she never wanted to delete a photo.

When Chris began his high school career at Parkersburg South, it gave Valerie an opportunity to branch out as the team travelled to different tournaments in West Virginia, Ohio, and Virginia. Her photos began appearing in the Parkersburg South wrestling program book as well as in the newly created Photo Gallery on WVMat.com. Impressed with Valerie's skill and the quality of her photos, South Assistant Coach Gary Porter suggested she submit some photos to *Wrestling USA Magazine*, insisting that her photos were good enough to be published and that it would be a thrill for the wrestlers to see their photos in a national magazine. Taking Coach Porter's advice, Valerie submitted photos of every boy on the team, and it wasn't long before her shot of heavyweight Zach Hanson made the cover! Now all a person has to do is flip through the pages of any *Wrestling USA* to see several examples of Valerie's craft.

After taking thousands upon thousands

of photos (none of which she wanted to delete, remember), Valerie got tired of dealing with annual computer crashes due to photo overload. She decided to purchase a website (<http://valeriesphotogallery.smugmug.com>) to both store the photos and bring in a little extra cash, which helps defray the cost of the site. Just this past season, she began selling photos to other teams.

In the "off-season", Valerie enjoys shooting Chris in action at his high school baseball games or anything else Brandon, Chris, and stepson Abe are into - "whatever is on the schedule for the day". But wrestling is still her favorite subject to shoot, because she enjoys capturing the expressions on the wrestlers' faces.

Owner of her own insurance agency, Valerie still finds time to travel to visit Brian when he's working out of town. The family also enjoys fishing at their camp in Bergoo, West Virginia. They also love to anchor their boat on the Ohio River and simply relax.

With Chris nearing the end of his junior year in high school, Valerie will continue to be on the scene of West Virginia High School Wrestling until Chris graduates, and then she plans to follow him through college and capture the matches of the newly-formed wrestling program at Ohio Valley University in Parkersburg. She plans to continue to shoot area wrestling events for a minimal fee and as fundraisers for the peewee programs. She will also photograph the younger kids who have come up through the wrestling program with her sons. "I will continue as long as it excites me," she stated.

Valerie no doubt has touched countless lives through her love of photography, and folks throughout the West Virginia wrestling community as well as numerous readers of *Wrestling USA Magazine* would agree that she is truly deserving of the title "*Wrestling USA Magazine's* Photographer-of-the-Year"!