

GMC Wrestling Community Helps Team in A Bind

With all of the obstacles caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the past two years have been frustrating for anyone associated with high school athletics.

The wrestlers from the Greater Middlesex Conference, who had been eagerly awaiting the GMC Tournament on Jan. 28-29, had another problem placed squarely in their path in the days leading up to the event hosted by Piscataway High School: The weather forecast.

With the possibility of a blizzard bearing down on the state, organizers were placed into scramble mode. The storm was supposed to begin on the opening Friday night, and continue well into Saturday, with more than a foot of accumulation possible.

"The weather was a roller coaster ride all week," said Ron Mazzola, director of the GMC Wrestling Coaches Association. "Every day, several times a day, we were coming up with alternate plans. With Covid not allowing us to have a tournament in 2021, we were determined to have our 2022 tournament, and we knew this was the weekend we had to get it done."

In the end, the tournament was completed, and a spirit of sportsmanship displayed by all involved created a feel-good ending for one wrestler in particular that deserves to be highlighted as part of NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, which is sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy and runs through Feb. 12.

To conduct the tournament, a couple of adjustments were made. The Friday start time was moved an hour earlier to 4 p.m., and the Saturday schedule was postponed until Sunday.

Still, with the forecast looking bad, and with transportation a concern later on Friday night, there were a few lingering problems. For one school, in particular, it seemed like there would be no chance to wrestle because of the weather.

For much of the day on Friday, it appeared as though Perth Amboy would be unable to travel to the tournament. But at the 11th hour, the school decided its team could go, albeit without district-provided transportation.

That's when the GMC wrestling community went to work.

"The GMC is a great conference, and everyone cares about the well-being and success of all of our student-athletes," said Kevin McCann, the South Plainfield Athletic Director, who is also the wrestling tournament director. "That, mixed with the family bond that the wrestling community has, made it possible for Perth Amboy to attend the conference tournament. The way everyone came together to find a way for them to get to the tournament and compete was outstanding."

Mazzola agreed.

"The GMC wrestling coaches are a tight-knit group, who look out for each other," Mazzola said. "They also want the tournament to be the best it could be."

The first thing was to delay the weigh-in as long as possible so that the Perth Amboy wrestlers could take the mat. Once that was accomplished, something else came to light.

To get to Piscataway, some of the wrestlers were driven by a parent, and the others came via Uber. And as soon as that became known, the GMC Coaches Association agreed to pay the \$25 charge the parents paid for that ride.

While all of the Perth Amboy wrestlers are important, there was a special interest in one in particular- sophomore 190-pounder Nazareth Pina, who entered the weekend undefeated after his freshman season had been canceled.

"After no season in 2021, this year has been very challenging," Perth Amboy coach Roberto Morales said. "I'm grateful for my school administration to allow our team to participate under the most difficult of circumstances. I'm also grateful and appreciative to my parents and the entire GMC wrestling community for their support and they're giving my team time to arrive, weigh in, and wrestle. Special shout-out to Ron Mazzola, Julia Schick, and Kevin McCann for their support."

Once the tournament began, Pina became one of its top stories. He remained undefeated in rolling to the 190-pound title, winning each of his bouts by pin or technical fall.

"This is priceless, just priceless," he told NJ.com after winning the championship. "I'm so happy we were able to come and wrestle."

"The sportsmanship that the coaches showed in agreeing to do whatever it took to get him in the tournament was outstanding," Mazzola said. "There is also a special spot for the battles that the urban schools face on a daily basis. The GMC coaches knew of the potential of their 190-pounder and knew he deserved to be there." "I think everyone was excited to see Nazareth Pina win the tournament," McCann said. "In wrestling, you learn to overcome adversity and that is what he did. The coaches of the conference really rallied around him in support. In this time of Covid, when things are getting canceled and opportunities are being taken away from our student-athletes, the GMC showed tremendous sportsmanship in making sure Nazareth could compete. He sure did shine!"

Aside from Pina's success, participating was valuable for all of the Perth Amboy wrestlers.

"Not only was it a great moment for Nazareth, but it was a great moment to witness my guys wrestle and gain valuable experience for next season," Morales said. "I can not say enough about their effort and performance. I'm proud of them all. Thank you to my assistant coaches George Vosinas and Ross Santana for their dedication and commitment on helping me rebuild our program."

