



Legendary athletes and coaches inducted into NJSIAA Hall of Fame

March 25, 2025

A group of seven history-making athletes and coaches became the latest to be inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame at a luncheon event on March 23 at the Westin Princeton at Forrestal Village.

The 27th annual Hall of Fame class was accompanied by the 44th annual presentation of the NJSIAA Award of Honor. In addition, four individuals were presented service awards for their contributions to the association.

The latest Hall of Fame athletes are Anthony Ashnault (South Plainfield HS, wrestling), Josh Evans (Irvington HS, football and track), Carol Lewis (Willingboro HS, track), Francesca Russo (Wayne Valley HS, fencing) and Nick Vena (Morristown HS, track). Inducted as coaches were Ken Frank (Toms River South HS, baseball) and Deanna Knobloch (Moorestown HS, lacrosse).

In what's become a tradition at the event, each Hall of Famer was introduced by a NJSIAA Student Ambassador. Handling those remarks were Sianni Wynn of Pennsauken High School, Chloe Alexander Jackson of Franklin High School and Olivia Domski of Bergen County Tech.

The Student Ambassadors had plenty of incredible accomplishments to mention in their speeches:

Ashnault, who graduated from South Plainfield in 2013, did so as the first unbeaten, four-time state champion in state wrestling history. His final record was 170-0, with each championship coming in a different weight class. He also won a NCAA championship while competing at Rutgers.

Evans, a 2009 Irvington grad, was an All-State quarterback and two-time Meet of Champions-winning hurdler during his senior year. He is the only athlete to pull off that football/track double. He also played four years of football at Florida and four years in the NFL.

Lewis, a member of one of New Jersey's greatest athletic families, set a state-record in the long jump as a Willingboro junior in 1980 that holds to this day. That same year, she qualified in the event for the United States Olympic Team. She won two NCAA championships jumping for Houston, and eight U.S. championships. She also joins her brother Carl, who was in attendance, as the first brother-sister combination in the NJSIAA Hall of Fame. Carl, one of the greatest track and field athletes in history, was inducted in 2006.

Russo, a 2014 Wayne Valley graduate, was a sabre specialist who became the first four-time fencing champion in state history. She was a two-time state Fencer of the Year, who went on to become a two-time NJSIAA champion at Notre Dame. She also competed in the 2021 Olympics.

Vena, a 2011 Morristown graduate, is the greatest shot putter in New Jersey history, and no one else comes close. He won the Meet of Champions, both indoors and outdoors, all four years with the Colonials, as well as four championships at the Penn Relays. He set a national record with 96 throws beyond 70 feet, including a majestic record-setting 75-10 heave in his last-ever high school throw at the 2011 MOC.

Frank retired after the 2024 campaign as the winningest baseball coach in state history, with a 47-year record of 934-356-3. His Toms River South teams won 62 championships, including five NJSIAA state titles.

Knobloch took over the Moorestown girls lacrosse program in 1992, a year after her graduation from college. A standout player during her time at the school, she coached the Quakers for 27 years, amassing a 557-44-4 record. Moorestown won 17 NJSIAA championships and seven Tournament of Champions titles under her watch.

All of the inductees were extremely gratified and humbled by the honor.

“I’m motivated,” Ashnault said. “They are such amazing people. After hearing all their speeches, I’m pumped up and I want to run through a wall. This is very cool.”

Russo stressed how fencing is mostly regarded as an individual sport, which happened to take her to competitions around the world. But competing with her friends at Wayne Valley allowed her to experience being part of a team.

“That was a big thing,” she said. “It was really fun and transferred into my college years and helped me to become a team player. This is such a really cool thing to be honored with all of these great people.”

Aside from being tremendous athletes, Vena and Evans are examples of people who have great love and respect for their high schools.

Vena now teaches and coaches at Morristown, while Evans has run camps and paid for equipment and academic programs in Irvington.

“This is such an honor, because I love New Jersey and New Jersey sports. It’s why I wanted to come back to coach at Morristown,” Vena said. “There are a lot of inspiring careers being recognized today, and it’s a honor to be a part of it. This is a big one.”

“It’s incredible to be here,” Evans said. “And being the first male athlete to be honored from Irvington means a great deal. I can never forget Irvington and what it has meant for me.”

The NJSIAA Award of Honor was presented to Senator Paul Sarlo, who is the Deputy Majority Leader of the New Jersey Senate. He represents the 36th legislative district, which includes 15 municipalities in Bergen and Passaic counties.

Since 2018, he has also been a valued member of the NJSIAA Executive Committee, and his support and advocacy for the organization and state’s high school student-athletes has been greatly appreciated.

He was also a standout athlete himself at Wood-Ridge High School, where he played football, basketball and baseball. He was also a NCAA Division 3 All-American baseball player at NJIT.

Service awards were also presented to four who’ve served their schools and the NJSIAA.

Joseph Bollendorf is a former coach, principal and superintendent at Washington Township. He has served on numerous NJSIAA committees, including seven years on the Executive Committee, and was President during the 2022-23 school year.

Tom Gambino has been at Immaculata High School since 1983, and its athletic director since 2012. The long-time successful baseball coach at the school, he has served on the NJSIAA Advisory and Controversies and Baseball Rules committees.

Robert Kellert has been State Editor for MileSplit NJ for the past 11 years and Regional Manager of Northeast MileSplit states since 2023. In doing so, he has formed a partnership with the NJSIAA across all three seasons (cross country, indoor track and outdoor track). The MileSplit database is used for registration, verifying performances for tournament entries and for providing a live results platform. Under Robert, MileSplit has also recorded a history of the sport, managed a database of career stats and rankings for every competing track athlete in the state and produced an unprecedented amount of video coverage.

Christina Emrich has been Athletic Trainer at Red Bank Regional since 1995 and Assistant Athletic Director there since 2006. She's served the NJSIAA and athletic training communities in numerous ways over the years, including time as President of the Athletic Trainers Society of New Jersey, and as a member of the NJSIAA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee and Steroid Appeals Committee. She also helped implement the NJSIAA's Heat Participation Policy, Concussion Return to Play and Emergency Action Plans, all of which are now state law.

