

50 Years of Nelson Fieldhouse

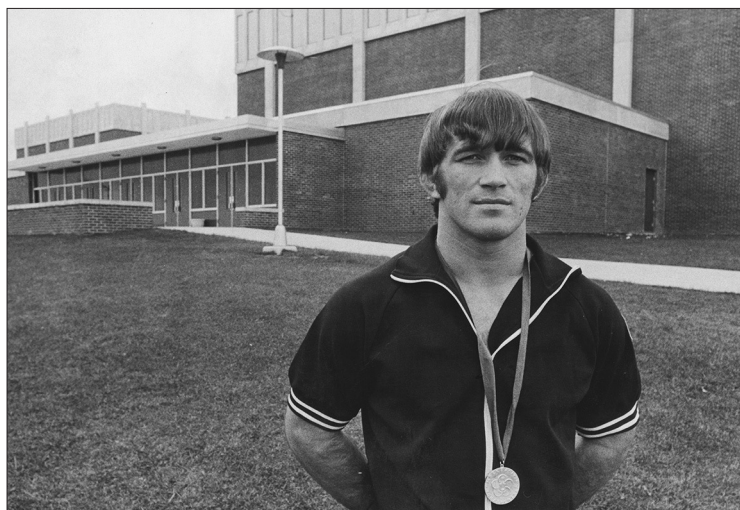
Robert Dunkelberger, 2005H and Ed Coar, 1978



Throughout the 2022-23 basketball season, program inserts for each conference game will mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the E. H. Nelson Fieldhouse. These inserts will feature various aspects of the histories of the five longest running sports housed by the fieldhouse: men's and women's basketball, men's and women's swimming, and wrestling. Today's installment features the story of arguably the two best wrestlers in Bloomsburg history and other standouts from Roger Sanders' tenure as head coach.

The wrestling excellence Bloomsburg enjoyed for 14 seasons under Russ Houk continued during the 21-year tenure of his successor, Roger Sanders. A fierce competitor who exemplified this excellence, competed for both coaches, and became the first NCAA champion wrestler for Bloomsburg, was Floyd "Shorty" Hitchcock.

A 1969 graduate of Wyalusing High School, Hitchcock made an immediate impact as a freshman and finished third at both the 1970 conference and NAIA championships at



Floyd Hitchcock sporting his University Games silver medal outside Nelson Fieldhouse, 1973

177 lbs. Then as a sophomore he lost just two matches and was crowned conference champion at 190 lbs. and finished second in the NAIA meet at 177.

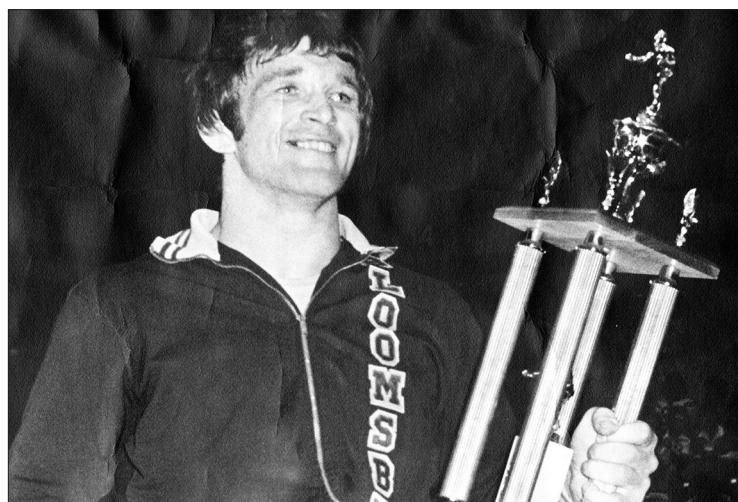
With no official wrestling team in 1971-72, Hitchcock kept in shape by competing with his teammates on a Central-Penn team, coached by Houk, that faced YMCAs and athletic clubs. Adding in various tournaments, he posted a record of 43-3-1. Returning to collegiate competition as a junior under Sanders, Hitchcock went 14-0 in dual meets and won his second conference title at 190 lbs.

For yet more experience, over the summer of 1973 Hitchcock prepared for tryouts to make the United States team and travel to Moscow to compete in the World University Games. After numerous matches, Hitchcock won the right to represent the U.S. in the 198-lb. weight class and won the silver medal.

Returning to Bloomsburg for his senior season, he was once more undefeated in dual meets at 14-0-2. Wrestling this time at 177 lbs., Hitchcock lost in the conference tournament finals. There was no time to rest, because just days later he was off to Fullerton, California, to compete in the NCAA Division II (College Division) tournament, where he won the title at 177 lbs. and was voted outstanding wrestler.

Less than two weeks later, Hitchcock was on his way to Ames, Iowa, for the NCAA Division I (University Division) championships. He won all five matches, captured the title, and again was named outstanding wrestler. Hitchcock concluded his collegiate career with a record of 84-7-2 and was voted into the inaugural class of the Bloomsburg Athletic Hall of Fame in 1982.

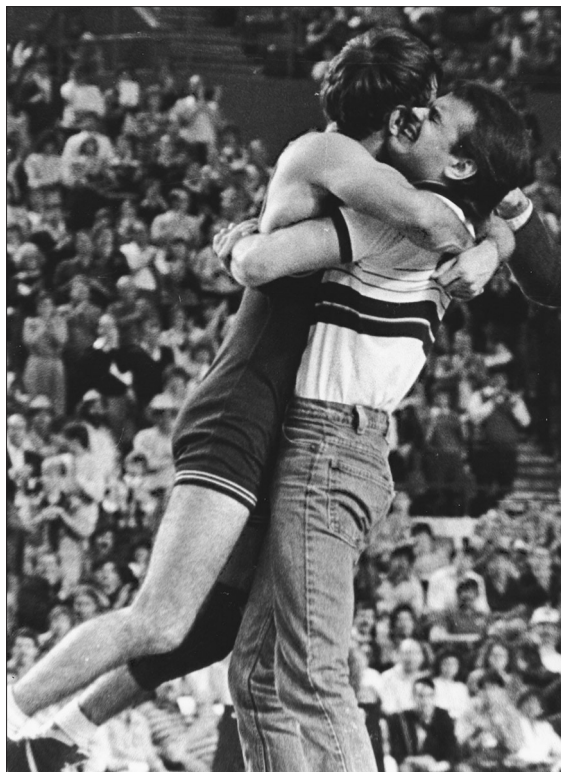
Over the course of the next decade more Bloomsburg wrestlers won acclaim, two of whom were teammates of



"Shorty" Hitchcock with the NCAA Division I trophy, 1974

Hitchcock. Ron Sheehan won the NCAA Division II championship at 167 lbs. alongside Shorty in 1974, while Randy Watts was the 1975 Division II champion and then finished sixth in the Division I meet, both in the 150 lb. weight class.

Additional wrestlers through the early 1980s who earned All-American status in the Division I tournament were Dominic DiGioacchino (5th in 1979 at 167 lbs. and a three-time champion in the Eastern Wrestling League or EWL),



Rick (left) getting a hug from Rocky after winning his first NCAA Division I championship, March 16, 1985

Tony Caravella (7th in 1980 at 150 lbs.), and Don Reese (2nd in 1982 at 134 lbs. and a four-time EWL champion). But it would not be until the arrival of two brothers in 1983 that Bloomsburg would have another national champion.

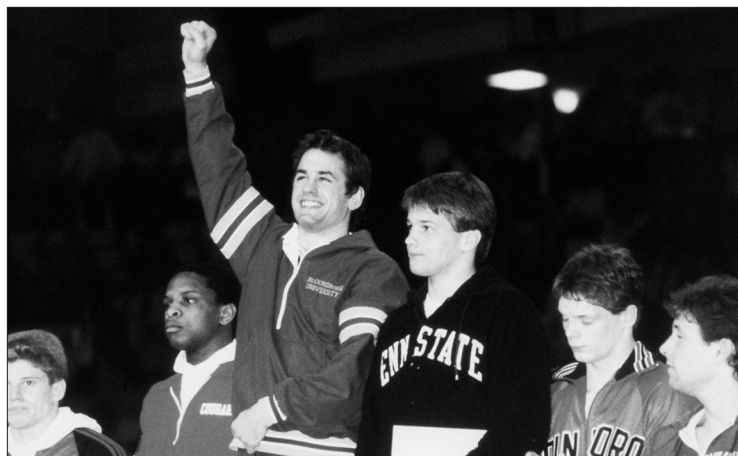
That year twins Rick and Rocky Bonomo, high school state champions and graduates of Lake Lehman High School who were coached by Shorty Hitchcock, joined Roger Sanders' team. Their freshman year both won PSAC titles, Rick at 118 lbs. and Rocky at 126, while Rocky also captured the EWL crown while his brother finished second.

In 1984-85, Rick and Rocky came out on top in both the PSAC and EWL tournaments before entering the NCAA championships in Oklahoma City. It was here that Rick joined his high school coach in the annals of Bloomsburg wrestling history by becoming the second Division I champion in school history. He won all five matches and defeated Iowa's Matt Egelund in the 118-lb. final. Rocky had a disappointing tournament and did not place.

Their junior season turned out to have more drama than anticipated when Rick briefly left the team, having lost his desire to compete. But he soon returned, better than ever. The brothers again won PSAC titles, having moved up a class, Rick to 126 and Rocky to 134. Returning to their former weights for the Bloomsburg-hosted EWL tournament, Rick won a second straight championship, while Rocky finished second. At the NCAA championships in Iowa City, Rick won his second straight national title, this time over Al Palacio of North Carolina. Rocky did much better this year, earning All-American status by finishing eighth.

In 1986-87 the issue was injuries, which forced Rick to miss the PSAC tournament, as well as Rocky, who did not begin wrestling until February. But both were back for the EWL and they once more captured titles at 118 and 126 lbs. That year the NCAA championships were in College Park, Maryland, and Rick's greatest challenge was not the other wrestlers, but getting down to his prescribed weight. He did this and again swept through the tournament, facing Penn State's Jim Martin in the finals. A Danville High School graduate, Rick had defeated him for the EWL title.

As John Michael's article in the *Press Enterprise* began, "It was the perfect way to end a brilliant career." Rick won 8-4 over Martin to claim his third consecutive national title. Rocky concluded his career with his best finish ever in fourth place. Rick was named both PSAC and EWL "Wrestler of the Year" for each of his last three seasons, had a career record was 116-12-1, and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1999. Rocky's record was 110-19 and he joined his brother the same year. Roger Sanders retired as head coach in 1993 with a mark at Bloomsburg of 250-104-8, eight first-place PSAC teams, two EWL championships, and the best finish ever in the NCAA tournament, fifth in 1987. Thanks to him, a 2014 inductee, and his wrestlers, Nelson Fieldhouse saw some of the best wrestling in school history.



Rick Bonomo celebrating his third consecutive national title on the podium in College Park, Maryland, March 21, 1987