

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 a history of wrestling at Bloomsburg, notable wrestlers and coaches, and the first match held in Nelson Fieldhouse. The next on wrestling will cover the careers of Floyd "Shorty" Hitchcock and Ricky Bonomo.

Wrestling, the second indoor sport at Bloomsburg, took 35 years to get going after basketball was established in 1894. Unfortunately in this instance, while basketball soon became very popular and the teams wildly successful, wrestling did not catch on initially. The first match was held on January 25, 1930, when wrestlers from Shamokin High School came to the state teachers college campus. Having



Russ Houk, wrestling coach, 1957-1971

already had two years of experience in the sport, the high schoolers won easily 27-0.

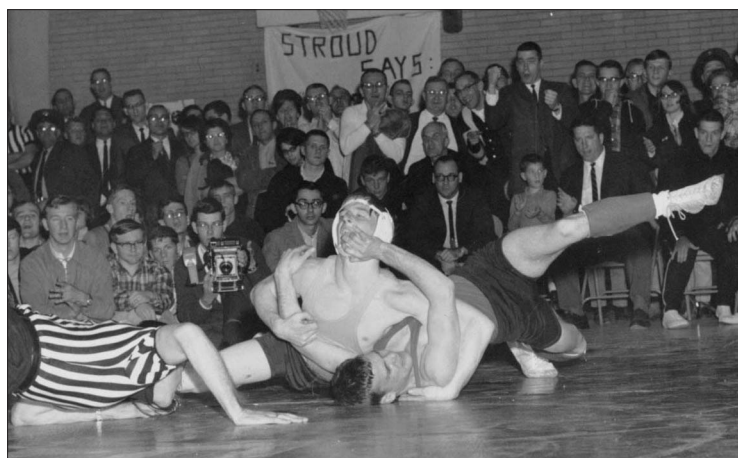
The matches were held in the original gymnasium, current site of the Kehr Union. That first season yielded just one win in six matches. A seven-year hiatus then ensued before the college tried again. Three seasons led to only two wins in 13 matches before the sport was again suspended. In January 1955 it was revived once more, this time in Centennial Gym. The team went 1-6 that first season coached by Jack Yohe, then 11-6 in two years under Walter Blair.

Real success did not come until the May 1957 hiring of Russ Houk, a 1952 graduate of Lock Haven, where he

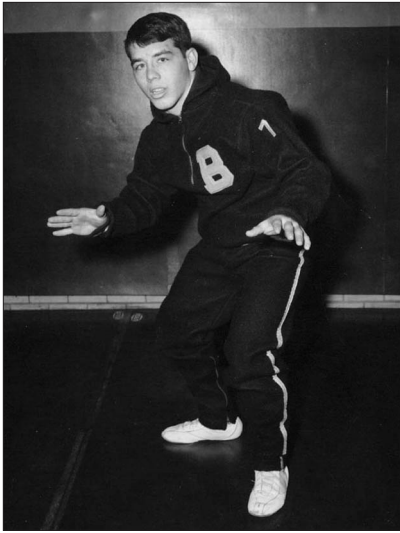
had been a standout in both football and wrestling. His first team went 5-2, then in 1958-59 the Huskies won nine of ten matches and captured the first conference championship in school history. This began an outstanding eight-year run, with Bloomsburg compiling a record of 85-7-2 and three National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) titles. In addition three wrestlers, Bob Hall in 1963 and Bill Robb and Richard Scorese in 1964, earned NCAA All-American status.

It was at the conference championships where the Huskies had their greatest success, winning the team title five times in Houk's first nine seasons with 27 individual champions. Leading the way was Jim Garman with three from 1957-59, winning his first under Walter Blair. Houk then had six more wrestlers become two-time title winners up through 1966: Gene Dixon, William Garson, Bob Hall, Bill Paule, James Rolley, and Tom Vargo.

The five seasons from 1966 to 1971 were good but not as stellar, with the team's dual match record being 52-25-2 and no championships. But there was still individual success. During those years there were ten conference tournament titles won by individual wrestlers, with repeat championships by Barry Sutter, Joe Gerst, Ron Russo, and Arnie



A Standing-Room-Only match with East Stroudsburg in Centennial Gym, January 15, 1966



Two-time All-American Ron Russo, 1968

Thompson. In addition, Russo earned NCAA All-American status in both 1968 and 1969.

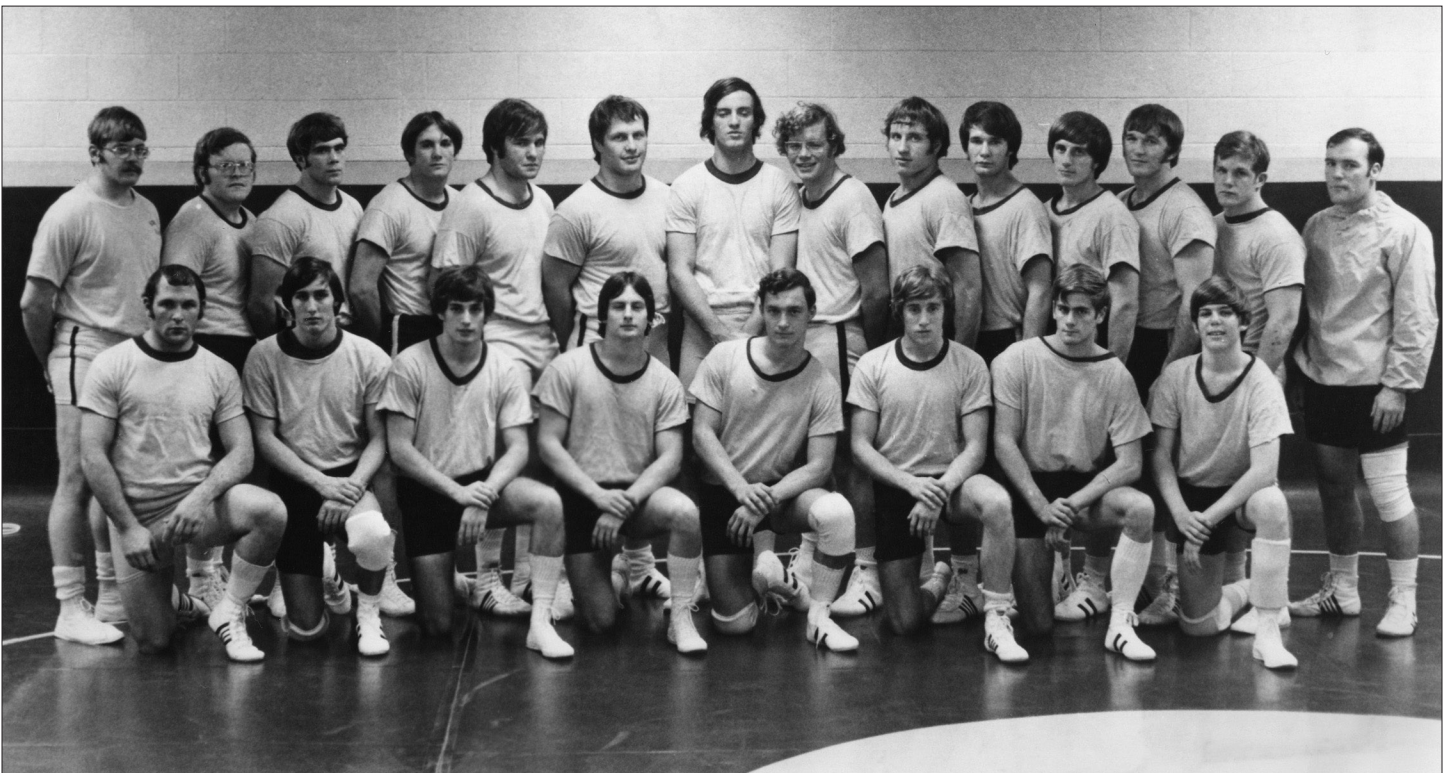
Houk's success could have continued, but in May 1971 he, along with three other coaches, resigned their positions in a dispute over athletic administration. Two returned to coaching and one left Bloomsburg, while Houk remained as a faculty member but no longer headed the wrestling program. Among the numerous honors he would be accorded for his coaching legacy at Bloomsburg (a 142-34-4 dual meet record in addition to the championships) was being named

in 1982 a member of the first class of the Bloomsburg Athletic Hall of Fame.

That was in the future, however. In the fall of 1971, the wrestling team still had no coach. While different scenarios with interim coaches were proposed, that December the team voted not to compete in 1971-72. Subsequently a new coach was hired, 1964 West Chester State College graduate Roger Sanders. An excellent wrestler with the Rams, as a senior Sanders won the NCAA College Division national championship. Just three later, after earning a master's at Ball State, he was named head wrestling coach at New York University, compiling a record of 50-18-1. Sanders was then hired to restart the Bloomsburg program.

The first wrestling meet in the new fieldhouse, dedicated to E. H. Nelson the following May, took place on December 9, 1972, against Edinboro. Bloomsburg fans were not disappointed as the Huskies chalked up a 24-18 win. Dan Beitler (126 pounds), Lon Edmunds (134), Randy Watts (142), Kevin Hayes (167), and Dan Burkholder (190) all registered decisions for the home team that evening, with Floyd "Shorty" Hitchcock scoring the only pin for Bloomsburg.

Although the team posted a dual meet record of just 8-9, it featured outstanding wrestlers, including Watts, Hitchcock, and Ron Sheehan. They would go on to great things and Sanders would have just one more losing record in his 21 seasons as head coach of the Huskies.



Nelson Fieldhouse's first varsity wrestling team, 1972-73. Kneeling, left to right: Matt Tydor, Mike Mallozzi, Bill O'Donnell, Dan Beitler, Dave Bilger, Dave Marr, Dan Roberts, and Robert Kocher. Standing, left to right: Phil Brown, Doug Anderson, Joe Krall, Steve Boyle, John Hohmann, Jim Hohmann, Kevin Hays, Ron Sheehan, Dan Burkholder, Lonnie Edmonds, Randy Watts, Floyd Hitchcock, Brian Berry, and Coach Roger Sanders.