

New England Independent School Wrestling Association History

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"Spectators at this tournament will see no mental or physical softness; they will see, however, the product of hard work and still harder thinking." -- from the 1960 N.E. Championship Program

When it was first formed, the New England Interscholastic Wrestling Association (NEIWA) included 20-30 public and private schools. Its purpose was two-fold: to foster wrestling in New England secondary schools and to conduct an annual interscholastic wrestling tournament. Currently, the NEISWA (New England Independent School Wrestling Association) has 59 teams, comprised of private boarding and day schools throughout New England, competing in four leagues: Class A (15 teams from CT, MA, ME, NH, RI), Eastern (5 Boston area schools), Independent ISL (11 MA teams plus one each from NH, RI), and Western New England (18 CT teams, 2 NY schools). League tournaments in February qualify individuals for the New England championships; any wrestler who has won two-thirds of his or her league matches, as well as the Eastern League champion and the top four from the other three leagues, are eligible to compete. Many former prep school wrestlers are now coaching at their alum or other schools (as many as 12 in 1997-98).

The first New England tournament was held in 1947. For the next few years, legendary wrestling names such as Gibby Graves (Buckingham, Browne, & Nichols), Haig Varadian (Cranston, RI), Louis Andrews (Milton), Wilbur Storer (Nobles), and Bert Kelsey (Roxbury Latin) would pick the best wrestlers throughout New England to form 8-man brackets and select alternates for each of the nine weight classes then in use: 115, 123, 130, 138, 147, 157, 167, 177, and Heavyweight. By 1953, "chalks and slates were provided at the scorers' tables," "the entrants were provided lapel pins" (suggested by M. Gorriaran), and in 1957 the contestants were required to wear "wrestling jerseys" while competing, thus ending the bare torso era!

In his book, *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, author John Irving (an Exeter '61 wrestler) recounts some of his experiences wrestling under their long-time coach Ted Seabrooke. The Association had more than doubled in size by this time, and in 1961 public and private New England schools separated to hold their own championships. It was Coach Seabrooke, along with Heb Evans (Governor Dummer), Ted Reese (Nobles), and Dick Lux (Andover) who worked on the creation of the Class A, B, and C leagues for independent schools. Heb Evans began his fastidious work on the newsletter for the Association, which Frank Millard (Northfield Mt. Hermon) has continued with the Class A Newsletter which has weekly updates on the league as well as notable individuals and teams throughout the N.E. Association. While records from this decade are spotty, Ted Davis (Hotchkiss) maintained copies of the brackets from the very beginning, which are now in the Hotchkiss as well as NEISWA libraries for anyone wishing to research further.

In the early 1970's, St. Paul's School (NH) joined the Association, and Coach John Buxton soon became the Association's secretary-treasurer. Along with Graham Ward (Brooks), Dick Griffin (Milton), and Larry Bidstrup (Tabor), they worked on upgrading the New England Championships. By 1981, the tournament had a format open to all N.E. private schools and was held annually at MIT.

With a slight acronym adjustment (N.E.I.S.W.A.), the New England Association had a very active western subset of Connecticut coaches (WNEISWA) that included John Wynne (Taft) and Ted Davis (Hotchkiss). They worked with Steve Toubman (Nobles), Duncan Innes (PCD), and Steve Ward (Roxbury Latin) to tackle issues such as the quality of entrants, date conflicts with the National Prep School Championships, and rising expenses. Choate (CT) was the first N.E. school to participate at the national level, first entering the competition in 1938. New England has represented itself well at the national level, including a total of 257 All-Americans from 1935 to present, as well as 28 National Prep School champions. Recently the leagues have moved their tournaments back a week to allow for additional participants, leading to a surge in N.E. place-winners, with a high of 19 All-Americans in 2003 and 62 placing in the top 8 from 2003-06.

Tournament "guru" Frank Millard (NMH) arrived in the late 1980s, after distinguishing himself in the collegiate coaching ranks. The major change was to bring the New Englands back to the schools, where it has been hosted by the four leagues on a rotational basis. We currently have approximately 60 teams from the seven New England states. The 21st century version of the N.E. championships brings together more than 200 participants in 16-man brackets to compete in the 14 weight classes. Phillips Exeter hosted the 60th annual tournament in 2007.

A major change is the adoption of the national weight management program, which assesses wrestlers' body fat, establishing a system for attaining and maintaining an ideal wrestling weight throughout the season, which cannot go below 7% (male) or 12% (female). In 2001, the Association voted to allow females to be full participants in league matches and tournaments, as well as eligible to qualify for the New England Championships.