

# Frank Popolizio, Jr.



Enters the  
National Wrestling  
Hall of Fame

## COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

Frank Popolizio, Jr.'s family has always had a rich Italian heritage. His father was born in Italy and immigrated to the U.S. in 1954. Growing up, Frank enjoyed tracing back his family names and learning where they came from. "I spent quite a bit of time visiting town halls and cemeteries in Italy. The Italian town halls had, and continue to have, extensive record keeping up to the late 1700s, then it transitions over to the church. We have a tradition of millers on the Popolizio side. Hundreds of years of millers – until we found wrestling."

Wrestling was a big part of Frank's life, even from an early age. He never thought about participating in wrestling initially, until Niskayuna High School coach, the legendary Hall of Famer Joe Bena, mentioned the idea to him when Frank was in seventh grade. Frank's cousin was wrestling in high school at the time, so the idea didn't seem too far-fetched. Frank gave it a try and quickly found his life's passion.

After his high school wrestling career came to a close, he continued the sport by coaching his brothers and cousins. He enjoyed it so much he never stopped coaching, obtaining his New York State Coaching License certification. He graduated Springfield College with a degree in Business, while also learning from some of the best coaches in the nation, including John W. Smith and Pat Smith at his brother's school, Oklahoma State University. After school he looked for a fulltime job that would allow him the schedule he needed to commit to assisting coaching with Bena at Niskayuna High School. He first worked as a manager in a fish market, then became an insurance agent with Dicesare & Spataro before jumping into wrestling full time.

His experiences learning at Oklahoma State was one of the catalysts to making this leap. "Being in Oklahoma heightened the entire experience," Frank says. "Historically, it was one of the hot beds of wrestling, so wrestling is immersed in everyday life. It's more of a mainstream sport, so I felt I could replicate some of that philosophy at home. I always had an entrepreneur mind. I loved the idea of

bringing organization, creativity and the element of business to the great sport of wrestling. And that's exactly what I did."

Frank began the Journeymen Wrestling Club in 2003 with the purpose to advocate, showcase, promote and teach wrestling to the immediate community. In the years since, it has been an important vehicle in the character development of many young men and women in our area while they trained in the sport they loved. Countless numbers of these athletes have since gone on to become state and national place winners and champions, including Nick Gwiazdowski. "Gwiaz is the man, myth and legend!" says Frank. "He came to our program when he was in seventh grade via Duaneburg. He is a real student of the sport, immensely loyal and he's extremely humble. Above all, Gwiaz loves his hometown and the people of Duaneburg." Nick has gone on to earn the titles of two-time State Champion (high school), two-time NCAA Champion and three-time finalist (college) and a World Bronze Medalist for Team USA.

There are four facets (the 4Cs) to Journeymen – club, camps, clinics and competitions. The club portion is a non-profit, established early in Journeymen history to advocate, teach and showcase wrestling throughout the Northeast. Set up similar to a school, the club conducts lessons and classes five times a week for 10 months out of the year. These classes help the athletes to learn wrestling at an in-depth level, covering all aspects of the sport including weight training, weight management and nutrition as well as technical skill and the other skills needed to be a successful, well-rounded athlete.

They also run camps throughout the state as well as in Georgia and North Carolina in conjunction with the coaching staffs at Penn State University, Oklahoma State University and North Carolina State University. The newest



Frank watches from the sideline at the Times Union Center as Shen wrestler and Journeymen Club member, Stevo Poulin, wins this year's state championship for Shen!

camp offered this year is an international camp housed right here in the Capital Region from May 14-21. The athletes will be coming from Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Bolivia, Italy, Sweden, France and New Zealand. Three months out of the year, Journeymen also hosts Michele Liuzzi, a 12-time World/Olympic team member for Italy and the current Italian National Coach, to teach Olympic freestyle wrestling.

Frank's passion for wrestling is evident in everything he does. Why does he love wrestling so much? "Because it's raw, pure and essentially primitive. Wrestling mirrors life perhaps better than any other sport. In the end, wrestling demands you have the same attributes that life requires of us – tenacity, drive, discipline and there's no excuses!" Coaching is hard work, but Frank is honored to play a part in the development of so many athletes. "I thoroughly enjoy working with young people. It's an incredible privilege to develop and influence a young person's confidence, attitude and belief system. It's something that's impactful and stays with them forever." He urges people to remember that a working system is essential to success. "Sometimes the simple belief in the system is more critical and important than the system itself. As success comes, athletes gain attention and recognition from the outside. When this happens, outside influences try to enter and change the system. This can often complicate the growth



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and development of the athlete. Stay the course and stay with the system that got you where you are!”

All of Frank’s hard work and dedication to the sport has paid off, not only for the many champion athletes that have trained under Frank’s direction, but also in recognition for his service. Frank has been nominated this year for the Order of Merit award for the 4th time. This national award is presented to an individual that has made a significant contribution to the advancement of wrestling, other than just success as an athlete or coach. The Distinguished Members of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame vote for the winner. This is one of the most prestigious honors in the Hall of Fame, with only 25 people nationwide ever having received this title.

Frank is also being inducted to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame this year with the Lifetime Service Award. This award is given every year as a tribute to the coaches, officials and contributors who represent the best qualities of the sport and who share these qualities with young people each day. Frank is honored to receive the award this year, but his work is far from over. “Even though this is called the ‘Lifetime Service Award,’ I am still very active in the sport and hope to be for quite some time,” he says. “I think of this award as a tool to help better promote wrestling, at least for me. At the very least it will motivate me to work harder, smarter and better. I see my best work ahead of me.”

Although wrestling is Frank’s greatest passion, he also enjoys many other things as well. His minor in college was Religious Studies and he had an opportunity to participate in an archaeological dig in Israel coordinated through the University of Nebraska. The dig site was at the ancient city of Bethsaida, possibly the site where Jesus miraculously fed thousands with only five loaves of bread and two fish (Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17).

Frank takes time out of the club during wrestling season to help coach at Shenendehowa High School every year. He also loves working out, hunting/fishing, farming, living clean, and most importantly, spending time with his family. His wife, Marilena, is originally from Sicily, Italy,

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## Frank loves motivational quotes.

Here are a few he lives by and shares with his athletes:

“You can sleep when you’re dead.”

“If you listen to other people, you’ll only be as good as they think you can be.”

“If you’re going to hoot with the owls, you need to rise with the roosters.”

“If you work from 6am-6pm, that’s a half of days worth of work. Work the whole day – dark to dark!”

“Is that the hill you want to die on?”

“Be comfortable being uncomfortable.”

immigrating to the U.S. in 1981. They have two children, Luca (9) and Cecilia (7), and live on a farm in Clifton Park with their cat, Joe, and Goldendoodle, Cooper, as well as five cows and 20 chickens. Frank is very proud of their little farm that currently sells eggs, hay and meat to family, friends and other farms, with turkeys coming this fall. “It’s a small farm, but it meets the NY State farm threshold nonetheless,” he says. “We have 5.65 wonderful acres in Clifton Park and that entails livestock – five Angus and a variety of chickens, along with some horse boarding. There’s another 100+ acres in the Duanesburg/Knox area, which focuses on hay crop and firewood. This year we had the experience of birthing two calves for the first time! Awesome experience!”

Cecilia’s hobbies include horses, soccer and piano, and Luca enjoys hunting, wrestling and soccer as well. Both kids love to cook and assist Marilena in the kitchen all the time. “They do a fantastic job!” says Frank. “I have watched them make cavatelli pasta from scratch, bread from scratch and even cook venison from one of our hunts.”

Their family loves spending time together regardless of where they are but Jade Bistro on a Saturday night is a family favorite. They also like to partake in the Italian tradition of Sunday afternoon lunches whenever they can too – meeting at a relative’s house for a meal together with many family members.

Frank has tried to live his life by one of his favorite philosophies and works to instill it in all his athletes as well. It is a motto that continues to bring him success.

“You need to be first, best, or different.” –Loretta Lynn

For more information on Journeymen Wrestling Club, visit <http://www.journeymenwrestling.com>. ■

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