



# Frank "Sprig" Gardner

## "THE FATHER OF NEW YORK STATE WRESTLING"

Few men have had a greater impact on a high school sport and an entire school district than Sprig Gardner has. Through his efforts wrestling on Long Island grew from a crudely run program at a few schools to a major sport that influenced wrestling programs in the state and the nation. Coming to the Mepham School District in 1936 during its second year of existence, Sprig Gardner helped create the high reputation for scholarship and wrestling that is carried on today in the same Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District. His influence reached state and national levels, as he was appointed a member of the to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame while coaching at Mepham.

While some cite Mepham High School's incredible records of the Gardner Era for his fame, many who knew the man realize his success was the result of his personal philosophy and coaching acumen. Sprig coached not wrestling but life. To each boy he imparted a concern for academic, athletic, and civic pride and responsibility. This genuine concern for each team member created a fantastic belief in him as a person and coach, and his system of teaching wrestling as being the best possible. The confidence this belief in him generated was overwhelming.

Sprig Gardner's success was built on innovation. His concepts of the "drill-system" revolutionized the sport. But, more importantly, he brought to sports deeper, more lasting values for the individual. While winning was the goal, Sprig stressed humility in victory and quiet acceptance of defeat. These reactions became associated with his boys and they gave the highly competitive and emotional sport of wrestling a dignity that assured recognition the vanquished as well as to the victorious.

Sprig spread high school wrestling to the state and to the nation. His efforts effected rules concerning weight classifications, match scoring procedures, and tournament procedures at local, state, and national levels. He opened his practice to boys from other schools and shared his coaching with them. He added a quality to wrestling that went far beyond the unparalleled statistics amassed by his winning teams.

Yet to leave out his record would be to ignore an incredible part of sports history. Having never wrestled and only coached briefly at East Hampton High School, Sprig organized his first Mepham team in 1936-37 in an abandoned elementary school turned into a high school. The ninth and tenth graders comprised a junior varsity that went on to defeat several varsity opponents and placed third in the annual South Shore Tournament. The following year Mepham entered varsity ranks and as incredible as it may seem the Pirates would not know defeat in a meet or tournament until January

31, 1946 when Baldwin defeated Mepham 21-15 after an undefeated string of 100 meets and tournaments. Yet that was merely an interlude to greater success. For Mepham would not lose again until January 14, 1955 when Amityville ended the Pirates undefeated streak of 130 by one point. The same Amityville team was the first to defeat the Pirates in tournament conditions after 18 consecutive years and 37 consecutive tournaments. During this unprecedented span Mepham won 18 consecutive South Shore titles and 17 Sectional Championships. In 1958, his last season as a wrestling coach, Coach Gardner's undefeated team (20-0) won 9 of 12 individual sectional titles, scoring 186 points, which totaled more than the combined score of the next ten schools.

Coach Gardner's overall record of 254-5-1, with 40 Tournament titles, 1 co-title, and 3 seconds and his wrestlers have included 106 sectional champions in 22 years of coaching. None of these records have been remotely equaled. But probably the most enduring mark of the man and his records was that these great feats were accomplished against the best competition he could find in 5 states including New Jersey, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia, and against teams representing city, county, and state all-stars.

The record fits the man—a man to whom wrestling was a part of life and a way to build strong values forged by dedication, hard work, sacrifice, and self-respect.