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Shawsheen wrestling coach Mark Donovan passes away from cancer at 55



Shawsheen wrestling coach Mark Donovan celebrates his team's first-ever win over state power Lowell in 2009. Donovan passed away Sunday afternoon at the age of 55 from bile-duct cancer. Photo courtesy of Brian Tildsley.

By **DANNY VENTURA** | donato.ventura@bostonherald.com | Boston Herald

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The news was expected, but it didn't make it any easier on the wrestling community.

Shawsheen wrestling coach Mark Donovan passed away Sunday afternoon at the age of 55 after a valiant battle with cancer of the bile duct. He leaves behind his wife Patti and two sons, Matt and Sean.

"We knew it was coming, but this is still a sad day," said Burlington wrestling coach Paul Shvartsman. "He was the perfect wrestling coach, he really cared about his kids. He is a legend in every sense of the word."

Hired as the school's wrestling coach at the age of 19, Donovan put together a Hall of Fame career. His teams won nearly 600 matches, and he coached a slew of state and New England champions, one being Alex Najjar.

"He was more than a wrestling coach to me, he was a second dad," said Najjar, who went on to wrestle at Boston University. "I had a lot of people around me for the technical aspects of wrestling, but coach Donovan was always the guy I went to when I needed to get my mind right. I wasn't always the greatest student but he was there to point me in the right direction and I know he did that for a lot of people."

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"The one word that comes to mind is mentor," Tildsley said. "He was a great coach and a great family man. He's just an amazing person who really loved Shawsheen."

That was never more in evidence than on March 25. In the midst of his fight against cancer, the school named the gymnasium in honor of Donovan. Shawsheen athletic director and football coach Al Costabile spoke of Donovan in glowing terms.

"The world just lost a great, great person," Costabile said. "Dunny gave it a hell of a fight. I coached with him for 24 years and I can truly say he's one of the greatest people I've ever been around. I honestly don't know of a person who has done so much for so many than Dunny."

While Donovan and his teams were dominant in the Commonwealth Athletic Conference, he wasn't afraid to schedule the legendary power programs in the Merrimack Valley Conference.

Bruce Rich spent four decades at Chelmsford, winning 648 matches. He always enjoyed the annual matchup with Shawsheen because of his friendship with Donovan.

"Mark was a great friend of mine and a class act who will be missed," Rich said. "He was a fantastic role model for athletes, just a great, great individual."

Former Central Catholic coach Dennis King was always impressed with Donovan's interactions with wrestlers behind the scenes.

"He was so good at teaching wrestling to the younger kids, he did a great job of breaking things down," King said. "He's just a really good guy and I am going to miss him."