

When John Dramesi wrestled for Haddonfield High School, the former 133-pounder worked a lot on his escapes.

"Are they still worth two points?" Dramesi asked Friday afternoon, wondering what takedowns are now worth compared to when he wrestled more than six decades ago.

Dramesi's greatest escapes, though, weren't on the wrestling mat wearing a Haddonfield singlet. He escaped twice as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War.

"I was captured both times," Dramesi said, "and tortured both times."

Dramesi, who turns 80 next month, was planning his third escape when

Haddonfield to honor escape artist

Kevin Callahan
Commentary



Dramesi

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he was finally released after five years and 11 months. He was imprisoned along with Senator John McCain at the infamous "Hanoi Hilton."

Dramesi, who lives in Western Pennsylvania on his 145-acre farm near Johnstown, is visiting back in South Jersey with his brother Leonard. They will attend the Haddonfield-Buena match at 10 a.m. this morning. Both wrestled on Haddonfield's first team in 1949.

In a classy tribute by the Haddonfield wrestling program, both men will be presented with a plaque in appreciation for their participation in the inaugural season of the wrestling program. The plaques will be hung in the wrestling room.

John, who at 155

pounds now looks fit enough to wrestle today, also will be presented with a framed mounted photograph of the American flag he made when imprisoned.

In prison, Dramesi made a flag using strips of cloth from other prisoners. When he was released, he snuck out the flag by sewing it between two handkerchiefs. His original flag now hangs in the Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, Calif.

This season, the Haddonfield wrestlers are honoring Dramesi by wearing his version of the American flag on their singlets.

This morning, they will hear Dramesi talk. He will speak to them in the wrestling room before the match.

"I will probably speak for only a few seconds," Dramesi said.

Hope not. Dramesi can tell the young men



Haddonfield wrestlers are honoring former wrestler John Dramesi this season by wearing a replica of a flag Dramesi sewed while he was a POW in Vietnam. PHOTO PROVIDED

more than they can possibly digest.

Hopefully, the retired Air Force Colonel will tell them he was captured after his F-105 fighter jet was shot down on April 2, 1967.

Hopefully, he will tell them he was surrounded by the enemy and was shot in the right leg.

That the wound went untreated. That after the second escape, his left

arm was shackled to his right foot for "it must have been over a week."

Hopefully, he will tell them his weight at the time dipped to 120 pounds.

Hopefully, he will tell them the prisoner he escaped with the second time, Ed Atterberry of Texas, was "tortured to death."

And, hopefully, what Dramesi will tell them is

he never gave into the torture.

The young wrestlers need to hear all of this. They might be a hero like Dramesi one day because of his words.

You see, Dramesi never gave any information to the enemy. The Vietnamese wanted him to write a magazine article saying the POW treatment was lenient. If he did, they promised to unshackle him. He never wrote the article.

Instead, he wrote a book, "Code of Honor," after he was released.

Maybe the young wrestlers will be inspired to read his book.

Dramesi, who grew up in Blackwood, laughed when asked about the irony of learning first to escape on the wrestling mat at Haddonfield High School.

He was serious, though, when asked how his training as a wrestler helped prepare him for

being a POW.

"It is relevant," he said about wrestling's discipline aiding him when alone and shackled. "No doubt about it, but it was the combination of wrestling, my dad, my physical capabilities, my heart ..."

Dramesi, a masterful and witty story teller, said he doesn't expect to change any young wrestler's life or vision when he talks with them today, saying "if it is part of their growth, then all is well." But, he just might.

And, perhaps, he will help them as wrestlers if Dramesi gets down on the mat, and shows the young wrestlers an escape.

Or two.

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