

# RALLY

*Haddonfield wrestlers wear a replica of flag made by a POW.*

## This is a symbol that inspires

When Haddonfield wrestlers look down, they also look back.

And that's the best thing about their new uniforms.

Haddonfield coach Bill Heverly said the replica American flag that adorns his wrestlers' singlets was placed on the leg as opposed to the chest or the back for a reason.

"When they're tired and they look down, they can see it," Heverly said. "And hopefully, it will remind them, 'Don't give up nothing.'"

The man who made that flag in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner-of-war camp in North Vietnam was in Haddonfield's gymnasium Saturday morning.

John Dramesi, a former Haddonfield wrestler and retired Air Force colonel, said he made the flag from pieces of cloth collected from other prisoners as an act of defiance against the psychological burden of captivity.

"When you are in that kind of harsh situation, you try to reidentify," Dramesi said, sitting in the school cafeteria before a wrestling match between Haddonfield and Buena. "We needed some kind of symbol of our cause, our purpose. The flag was the means to do that."

When Dramesi was released after six years of captivity in 1973, he presented the flag to President Richard Nixon. The flag is kept in the National Archives in Washington, and a replica is displayed at the Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Lin-



**John Dramesi, who spent six years as a POW in Hanoi, was at Saturday's match. At left is assistant coach Mike Miller; at right, Jim Ritchings of the booster club.** APRIL SAUL / Staff

da, Calif.

And another replica is worn on the leg of every Haddonfield wrestler who takes the mat this season.

"It's important to remember what came before us," said Haddonfield principal Chuck Klaus, a former wrestling coach at the school.

It was great that Haddonfield honored Dramesi, a fit and sharp 79-year-old who was a member of the school's first wrestling team in 1949.

Dramesi still remembers that first season.

"I don't think we won a match," Dramesi said. "But the next year, we won 50 percent and I won 50 percent. By the time I was a senior, I only lost one match."

Dramesi, who lives on a 146-acre farm in Western Pennsylvania, believes that lessons he learned on the wrestling mat helped him during his ordeal in

North Vietnam.

"When I came back, I had to meet with a lot of doctors and psychologists," Dramesi said. "They would always say, 'What happened over there had to change you.'"

"I would tell them, 'No. It didn't change me.' What happens in a situation like that is that it exaggerates the qualities you already have. If you went over there weak, it made you weaker. If you went over there strong, it made you stronger."

"So when I look back, I see that base, that foundation that was formed right here as a wrestler for Haddonfield."

Dramesi is an American hero who deserves his nation's praise and gratitude. He is a hard man — openly critical of American political imperatives that have led us "to lose every war

since Korea" — who seemed genuinely touched by the opportunity to return to his old high school and watch his old team.

But the best thing about Saturday's pre-match ceremony and post-match reception — as well as the annual presentation of the Dramesi Award, which Heverly says is given to Haddonfield's "toughest" senior wrestler — is the clear connection with the past.

Too often in today's fast-paced world, we forget or marginalize our history. In sports, too many players and coaches — from youth leagues to the professional level — fail to recognize and appreciate the efforts of all the people who laid the foundation for today's games.

On a clear winter morning, a man walked right out of the history books and into Haddonfield's gymnasium.

He had been there before, as a boy learning to become a wrestler. He became that and so much more.

He sat in those old wooden bleachers and watched as another group of boys took the mat to represent the same school.

And hopefully, his presence reminded them — and the rest of us, too — that when they look down and see that flag, they also look back and see the courage and sacrifice of the man who made it.



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