

Hall of Fame

# Big man on campus

## Lightweight champion Steve Fernandes put Southington wrestling on the map

By JOHN GORALSKI  
SPORTS WRITER

Good things come in small packages. It's true today, and it was true in 1976 when Steven Fernandes strolled into his first wrestling practice in a small, windowless room at Derynoski school that doubled as a drying room for the football team's laundry.

Wrestling was much different than it is today. Bob Wittneben had established the teams just three seasons before, and he was still struggling through split-squad practices to build momentum for his fledgling program. Fernandes walked in the door, and it was an early Christmas gift that Wittneben couldn't wait to unwrap.

### Athlete

"He never wrestled before, but he was just so well-adapted for it," said the coach. "He was a very good athlete. He was very competitive, and he was smart and dedicated to wrestling."

Fernandes was new to the town, relocating from the east end of Waterbury where he'd established himself as a deceptively strong kid with a street fighter's toughness. Wittneben hoped to tap that toughness in his rookie wrestler even though it usually takes years to learn the techniques needed to win.

"He just had a great attitude," Wittneben said. "He would never ask other people to do things that he wouldn't do himself. He was a great practice wrestler. He had a lot of smarts. You could teach him things, and he would pick them up really quick. He worked really hard, and he applied all of those things when he wrestled."

It didn't take long for his efforts to pay off in competition. Fernandes went 14-1 as a sophomore, and scrambled past experienced wrestlers to place third at the Class LL championship. Fernandes was the spark that Southington needed.

“He was strong. He was fast, and he was dedicated. If you take those combinations, I don't care if you're 6-foot-4 and 250 pounds or 5-foot-4 and 100 pounds, you'll be good.”

Bob Wittneben,  
Former SHS wrestling coach

"It was very important to me and the team. They saw this little kid winning—there was only a couple of sophomores wrestling at that time—and to see us do well was important," Fernandes said. "They didn't do it like they do today where they start at a different weight class each time. It was always a 100-pound start, so 14 times we started off with a lead against whatever team we wrestled against."

Fernandes fell in love with the sport and threw himself into his training with wild abandon. He finished the regular season undefeated (17-0) as a junior, won the Class LL title, and finished second overall at the state open. He began to grow, mentally and physically, moving up weight classes each season.

As a senior co-captain, Fernandes battled in the toughest division in the state, and he led the Knights to their first undefeated regular season. The fifth year program held its own in the Colonial Conference against powerhouse teams like Pulaski High School in New Britain and Maloney High School in Meriden.

"Out of the league, I always tried to schedule the best teams that I could wrestle at the time like Bukeley, Wethersfield, and Glastonbury. The year that

we were state champions, Glastonbury won the Class Ls, and we beat them 31-30. All those programs were top notch programs, and Steve usually wrestled their best wrestlers."

Fernandes welcomed the challenge. "I was an athlete, but I had that aggression, that heart, and that mind connection. I just wasn't afraid. I trained and trained," he said. "I used to love to go to practice because I just loved that aggression, that head-to-head competition. I loved that 'you can't take me down' mentality."

The small, inexperienced kid from Waterbury had developed into an all-state wrestler, but Fernandes was just getting started. After graduation, he threw himself even harder into the sport.

He attended a college camp, began to challenge college wrestlers, and began to hone his technique.

"The harder I trained, the better I got. The better I got, the harder I trained," he said. "That's exactly how it worked, and it never stopped."

Fernandes would work long hours in the gym, practicing moves 200-300 times before he'd use it in a match. He wrestled for two seasons at Western New England College and transferred to Trenton State College to challenge himself against an even higher level of talent.

Practice became a way of life. "I would hit a move 50 times, another 50 times before I used it. I would hit it from both sides until I had it," he said. "That's how I trained. You can't hit a move two or three times and think that you can hit it in a match. You have to practice on your own, practice on your own, practice on your own. I would just work with guys, work with guys, work with guys. It was all practice, situational stuff."

The hard work paid off. Fernandes was a three-time all-American as a division III wrestler. In 1982, he earned a national title in the 134-pound division.

"I don't know how you'd find this out, but I believe that he was the first wrestler from Connecticut to be a national champion in wrestling," Wittneben said. "He would still be an out-

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SUBMITTED

Steve Fernandes was small in stature but big on the mat as a frontrunner in the Blue Knight wrestling program.

**Southington Sports Hall of Fame**

**Inside the Numbers**

- Overall HS & college record: 228-14-1

**High School**

- SHS regular season record: 47-2-1
- SHS postseason record: 15-5
- Co-captain 1978 CT Class LL Champions

**SHS Career Statistics**

1976—14-1 in dual meets, 2-3 at Class LL (3rd).  
1977—17-0 in dual meets, 4-0 at Class LL (1st), 3-1 at state open (2nd).  
1978—15-1-1 in dual meets, 3-1 at Class LL (2nd), 3-1 at state open (2nd).

**College (Western NE, Trenton State)**

- NCAA Division III champion (1982, 134lb)
- 3-time NCAA division III all-American

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