

Wrestling for a Higher Calling

Anthony Rivera was among a handful of Brentwood wrestlers who shrugged off vacation to work silently and tirelessly through drills at school each morning this week. While many of his peers took advantage of the time off and slept in, class was still in session for this title hopeful.

With speakers pumping musical adrenaline and a heater transforming the Brentwood wrestling room into a sauna, Rivera toiled until he was wobbly-kneed. Every step the 160-pound senior took rained sweat onto the rubber mat. Success at the Suffolk wrestling championships this weekend — and a ticket to the state meet in Buffalo — are the motivation behind the maddening sessions.

INSIDE HIGH SCHOOLS



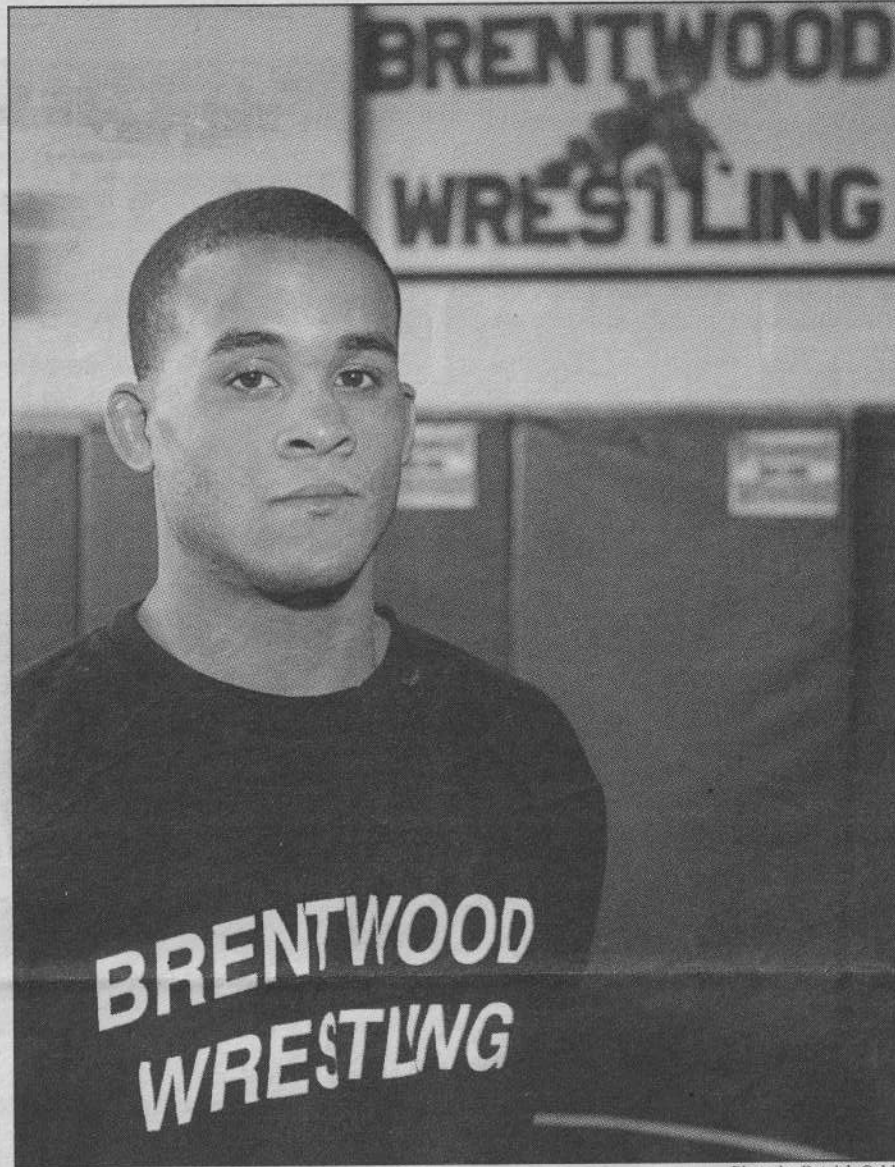
Jason Molinet

“Who wants a window seat to Buffalo?” Brentwood coach Ralph Napolitano shouted over the soundtrack to “Rocky” as he and assistants circled the class-sized room.

It’s an atmosphere every bit as dense as pound cake. There are a world of problems that await on the other side of the door. For now, this is Rivera’s reality. And he dives into it, grappling with senior teammate Omi Ortiz in a dance that has become familiar. The duo hone their technique with each takedown, a ritual they have shared for the better part of three years.

So Ortiz, a Suffolk League I champion in the 145-pound weight class, knows Rivera’s weakness. “We’ve been wrestling so long,” Ortiz said, “I know his weak points and try not to give in to his strong points.”

Any one who faces Rivera, a force at



Brentwood wrestler Anthony Rivera uses wrestling to get through problems of life.

Photo by Patrick Oehler

160 pounds the last two seasons, can attest to what makes the Brentwood wrestler so overwhelming. It’s upper body strength. Rivera, 28-0 this year,

loves to throw his foes like rag dolls.

“Any one who wrestles him knows they’re in for a six-minute battle,” said Napolitano, a former Brentwood

wrestler and assistant before taking over the program a year ago. “He won’t stop.”

But what drives Rivera has little to do with the sport itself. All the winning and bonding is just fine. The sculpted body that results is an added perk. Rivera uses the hours of machine-like repetition to quiet the pain of a broken heart and traumatized psyche. Rivera never knew his father. And then his mom, Diana Rivera, died suddenly when he was 14.

“My life,” Rivera said slowly, “I didn’t care about it. I didn’t want to live. She was gone at a point when I really needed her.”

Diana Rivera made a career for herself in the Navy. That lifestyle didn’t allow for a home life. So Anthony Rivera was raised by grandparents in Queens. That all changed in the fall of 2000. Diana Rivera took custody of Anthony and younger brother, Joshua Green, and moved to Chicago. It was the start of Rivera’s freshman year. He had to give up wrestling at Brentwood, but it was for a far greater dream. That fantasy ended months later when his mom died two days after checking into a hospital with an upper respiratory infection. She was 37.

The brothers were split up once again. This time Anthony landed on Long Island with Marion and Ralph Nieves, his aunt and uncle. Things could have gone bad for him. Distractions are easy to find around any street corner. Rivera leaned on a familiar crutch. He lost himself in wrestling.

“My motto is go on with life as life comes,” Rivera said. “I live one day at a time. There are less fortunate people. I could have no guardian. I could be on the streets.”

Now Rivera is poised to challenge for his first county title. And a future at SUNY-Brockport beckons. What fuels Anthony Rivera? Glory has little to do with it. He simply chose to live.