



PHOTO BY JOSEPH D. SULLIVAN

West Islip coach Tony Mellino has been a positive influence in the wrestling community for more than 30 years.

WRESTLING

The ultimate decision

■ **Mellino, mentor for coaches and athletes, will retire after season**

BY GREGG SARRA
STAFF WRITER

Tony Mellino moved and contorted his body in ways only a master of more than 30 years of coaching the sport of wrestling can.

The long-time West Islip coach almost willed Kyle Keane's 6-5 quarterfinal win over Sayville's Davy Bachy at 140 pounds in the Suffolk County Division I wrestling championships at the Indoor Sports Complex at Stony Brook University on Friday.

It was an especially rewarding moment for Mellino, who will have the opportunity to coach the unseeded Keane in Saturday's semifinal against unseeded Bill Swezey of East Islip. The chance to crown one more champion was not lost on Mellino, who will retire at the end of the season after compiling a 312-113-4 record.

"[Keane's] already done a great job," said Mellino, who led West Islip to a 12-4 dual-meet record this season. "He's going to be a place-winner, and that's not easy coming from the outbracket."

Mellino is a coach who always does something extra to give his wrestlers an advantage. He studies opposing wrestlers, looking for strengths — and weaknesses

his wrestler can exploit.

Take Keane, who placed but third in Suffolk League III. On Friday, he pounded his first two opponents in the county tournament, including a 57-second pin of third-seeded Jon Gress of Westhampton Beach.

"He is a master at his craft and breaks down opposing wrestlers to help his kids gain an edge," said Sean Brocking, who has been one of the top-rated Suffolk officials for the past 30 years. "And he knows his kids so thoroughly that he can help with the flow of a match and use strengths to an advantage. He's an old-school coach who has earned everyone's respect."

Mellino has coached 11 coun-

ty champions, eight state place-winners and three state champions, including two-time winner Rick Brzozinski (1984 and 1986) and Jason Cohen (1992). Mellino will be inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Okla., this spring.

"He has left an indelible mark on this sport," East Islip coach Guy Leggio said. "He was a mentor for so many coaches and the model of sportsmanship. He's been a mentor to every coach on Long Island."

Added Brocking: "Every year we vote for the coach of the year, and we had to stop nominating him because we didn't want to give it to the same guy all the time."