

# Johnny Orr:

*Left his mark on mats at Altoona, Princeton*

**By John Hartsock**

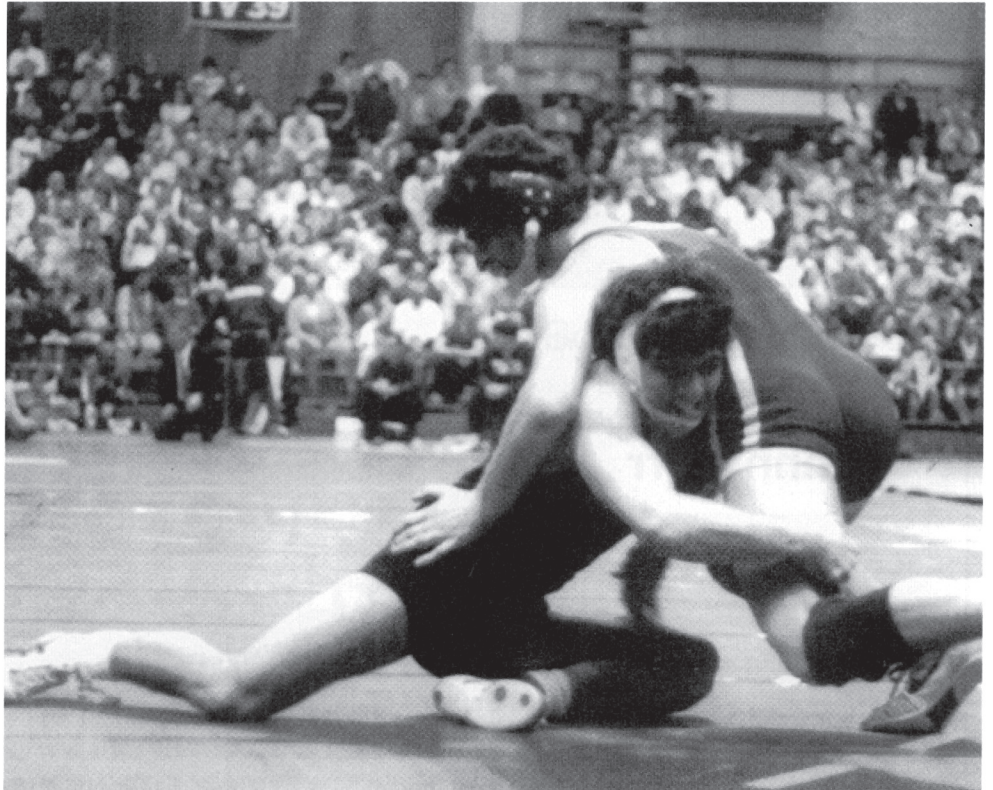
*Altoona Mirror*

Johnny Orr enjoyed a fabulous and memorable high school and collegiate wrestling career. But even today, at age 35, he wonders about what might have been.

Orr was one of the best wrestlers ever to come out of Altoona High School, where he posted an 86-5-1 career record, won three District 6-AAA championships, one Northwest AAA Regional title, and qualified for the state tournament in all three of his varsity seasons.

But one of the matches that still lingers in Orr's mind as he takes his daily four-mile run around the Harrisburg suburb of Duncannon – where he lives with his wife, Wendy (Biesecker) and sons Alexander, 5, Grady, 2, and Hunter, seven months – is his 5-2 loss to Parkland's Doug Billig in the 98-pound state championship match in 1979.

It was Orr's only loss in 29 matches as a high school junior – and the sight and scent of a PIAA state championship, Orr would have become only the third Altoona High School wrestler, joining Brad Benson and Steve Maurey, ever to achieve one – has remained palpable through the years.



*Johnny's aggressiveness helped make him a two-time All-American.*

"I was pretty disappointed," Orr, admitted. "I really thought I could beat him. In fact, I did beat him later on in college, (when Orr wrestled at Princeton and Billig competed at Wilkes). I just didn't wrestle a very good match."

Orr's senior-year state tournament experience, in 1980, was nearly as frustrating. He was gearing for a certain state championship showdown with Erie Cathedral Prep's Kevin Darkus, a future NCAA titlist at Iowa State who had beaten Orr in the Northwest AAA

Regional final. But Orr suffered a separated shoulder in winning the 112-pound quarterfinal match and had to default his next two matches and settle for fourth place.

Overall, Orr's high school wrestling experience was an exceedingly positive one, however.

"I loved it, without a doubt. I had good success, and our teams had good success," he said, remembering teammates Dan and Jim Baranik, Jeff Everhardt, and Troy Benson as the nucleus of those successful Altoona squads. "I never lost a dual



# Blair County Sports Hall of Fame '98

meet in high school. Probably the highlight of my high school career was us beating Clearfield on the road in a dual meet for the Mountain League championship. Clearfield was coached by Neil Turner, and he lost only three dual meets ever there. We had good team balance, with six guys in the district finals my senior year."

Veteran Altoona wrestling coach Marty Rusnak remembers Orr as one of the best he's taught in 33 seasons.

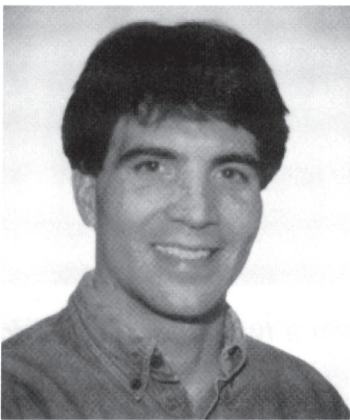
"He was a pleasure to work with," Rusnak said. "He

was a real nice person off the mat, but when he was wrestling, he was one of the most aggressive people I've ever known."

Orr went on to Princeton, and to more great achievements, but a couple more disappointments.

He racked up an 89-9 college record and was a two-time NCAA All-American, two-time Ivy League Wrestler of the Year, won one Eastern Wrestling League championship, and earned Princeton's highest honor for a male athlete, the school's William Winston Trophy.

## Johnny Orr



**Sport:** Wrestling.

**High school:** Altoona Area, 1981.

**College:** Princeton University

**Hall of Fame achievement:** All-American, two-time runnerup in NCAA wrestling championships and two-time Ivy League wrestler of the year.

**Current occupation:** Plant manager.

**Current residence:** Duncannon, Pa.



*Johnny (front row, second from right) won the EWL title in 1984*

But the fact that he never made it to the top of the national podium in college still nags at him as well. He placed second twice, losing 142-pound title matches to Cal State-Bakerfield's Jesse Owens, 19-11 as a junior, and 4-3 to Iowa State's Joe Gibbons as a senior.

"I was awfully excited to get there, but losing was real disappointing," Orr said. "I didn't like to lose. I was more persistent and stubborn than I was a great (wrestling) technician."

That tenacity has served Orr well in his professional life. After earning a degree in history at Princeton, he served as a graduate assistant coach under Rich Lorenzo at Penn State, while completing a master's degree in business administration.

Orr, who tried out for the United States Olympic wrestling team in 1988 and made it to the final five in trials at Pensacola, Fla., at 136 pounds, is employed as a materials manager for New Holland, Inc., and works at its Belleville office, near Lewistown.

His wife is a 1982 Altoona graduate and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Hunter Orr, and maternal grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. William Marinelli, still live in Altoona.

"Altoona was a great place to grow up, and I'm really excited about my induction into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame," he said. "There are some great names who are a part of it. It's a great honor."