

2024 AAU Wrestling Hall of Fame Banquet

by Mike Newbern

2024 Inductee's

John Smith and Kenny Watkins

Annual Award Winners

Person of the Year: Les Painter

AAU Coach of the Year: George Bergman

Sustained Performance of the Year: Shane Gorder

Friends of AAU Wrestling: 3X Gear

District Person of the Year: Troy Greder

Women's Referee of the Year: Nadine Johnson

Men's Referee of the Year: Mark Kenny

Gary Myers, AAU Wrestling's Awards Chairman opened up the banquet by introducing and welcoming back Wade Schalles as the AAU's new Executive Wrestling Director. The multiple time Hall of Fame Wrestler, writer, coach, and innovator returned to the AAU after 20 years of working independently.

Wade is a well-known wrestling historian who enlightened the attendees about the AAU's history of American sports. The AAU became the first sports organization in 1888 and is the oldest organization of its kind in the world. Their first competition was a wrestling tournament in New York City. The AAU was the organizer and qualifier for Olympic athletes. In 1904 Robert Cary, a wrestler, became the first American to win an Olympic Gold medal. He also was worker in 1903 with the Wright Brothers during their first aircraft flight in Kitty Hawk North Carolina.

Wade then handed the microphone to Master of Ceremonies Jacob Bough, a for wrestler at Purdue University and coach at Kokomo High School in Indiana.

2024 AAU Hall of Fame Inductee John Smith



John Smith was unable to attend the ceremony, but he was well represented by 2023 AAU HOF Inductee and former Oklahoma State teammate Tom “Big Cat” Erickson. Tom, an assistant wrestling coach at Duke University praised the officials for their consistency on the mat this week. He also spoke fondly of John having been awarded the “Master of Technique” Award at the 1991 World and 1992 Olympic Championships.

John Smith is a folkstyle and freestyle wrestler and coach. Smith was a two-time NCAA Div.1 national champion, and a six time consecutive winner with two Olympic Championships and four World Wrestling Championships. At the end of his competitive career, Smith had won more World and Olympic gold medals in wrestling than any other American. Smith was widely known for his low single leg takedown and is considered one of the greatest freestyle wrestlers of all time.

Smith wrestled at Del City High School in Del City Oklahoma. While in high school Smith had a 105–5 record and was a two-time Oklahoma state champion.

Smith competed at Oklahoma State University, Smith's college career record was 154-7-2. At the NCAA Division 1 Wrestling Championships, Smith was a three-time national finalist and a two-time national champion. After losing in the 1985 finals to future US House representative Jim Jordan,

he finished his college career with 90 consecutive victories.

Beginning in his teenage years, Smith competed internationally in freestyle wrestling. Highlights of his career include four UWW World gold medals, and two Olympic gold medals. At the Senior level, his international freestyle wrestling record was 100–5. He is the only American wrestler to ever win six consecutive World and Olympic championships as a competitor.

Smith became the head wrestling coach at Oklahoma State University in 1991. During his tenure, Oklahoma State University won five national team titles, with titles coming in 1994, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006. As of 2022, his overall dual meet record was 490-73-6. He had also coached 33 individual national champions and coached his wrestlers to 152 All-American honors. Smith has brought 21 team conference titles and 129 individual conference championships to Stillwater as a coach, as well. John recently announced his retirement and departure from OSU.

In 1990 John was the first wrestler to be awarded the Amateur Athletic Union's James E. Sullivan Award.



Tom "Big Cat" Erickson accepting the HOF Award for John Smit.

2024 AAU Hall of Fame Inductee Kenny Watkins



Kenneth Watkins began wrestling at Argo Community High School and Proviso East before joining the US Army from 1979 – 1987. He served for 8 years and obtained the rank of Sergeant as a Calibration Technician (35H) and Electronic Instrument Repairman (35B) and was in a select group of trained operators of the White Sands Missile Range Solar Furnace.. He competed in open wrestling tournaments during his military career which included tours of duty at White Sands Missile Range (New Mexico), Ft Wainwright (Alaska) and Seoul Korea.

During his Army career, Ken followed Illinois wrestling by having his mom send him clips from the local newspapers. After returning home, he continued to follow wrestling and went to many state post season tournaments. His love of the sport found him at West Leyden High School where he watched the Dual Team State Championships. During a break he spoke with one of the officials and inquired how he could become an official. After the conversation and a television news report on the lack of officials for high school sports he obtained his officials license in 1993.

He has officiated for 30 years and since obtaining his official's license Ken's passion for the sport of wrestling has led him on a path whereby he has officiated many High School State and National tournaments. Some of his officiating accomplishments include IHSA Individual State Championships (8x), IHSA Dual Team State Championships (8x), IKWF Individual State Championships (8x), IKWF Kids Open (8x), IKWF Dual Team State Championships

(4x), IESA Individual State Championships (5x), Hinsdale Central Rex Whitlatch Tournament, Dvorak Tournament, Barrington Moore-Prettyman Tournament, AAU Disney Duals (20x), Ohio Tournament of Champions (15x), NHSCA Senior/High School Nationals (12x), NHSCA Duals (2x), Beast of the East (7x), Reno Tournament of Champions (2x), Rocky Mountain Nationals, Reno World of Wrestling (12x), AAU Illinois Frosh/Soph State Championships (2x), AAU World Folk style Championships (8x), The Clash, AAU Middle School Duals (3x), USA Middle School Duals (6x), USA Winter Nationals (2x), AAU Brute Scholastic Showcase (2x), Dixie Duals, Super 32 (5x), Tulsa Nationals, Black Hills Nationals (4x), CPS Championships (7x), Chicago Beat the Streets (3x), NHSCA Pre-season Open (3x), Grappler Fall Classic Michigan State University (2x), Border Wars, IWCOA Midwest Nationals (8x) and many other local, national and state series meets and Tournaments.

Ken's service to wrestling includes Certified Wrestling Official (State of Illinois), Illinois AAU officials Rep (15 yrs), TOC Illinois Official's Rep (15 yrs), AAU Core Official (15 yrs), IKWF West Chicago Sectional Official's Chairman, AAU Middle School Duals Head official (2X), AAU Outstanding Folk Style Official of the year (2003), Illinois Wrestling Coaches and Officials Association (IWCOA) Hall of Fame (2016), IHSA Wrestling Officials Clinician (5years), Illinois Wrestling Official of the Year (2023), Illinois Officials Advisory committee member (current term).

Ken currently resides in Maywood, IL with his wife (Marcella) and his children (Xavier 27 and Mickayla 22).

AAU Wrestling Person of the Year: Les Painter of Nebraska

Congratulations, Les Painter of Nebraska. Coach Painter has been recognized as the 2024 AAU National Wrestling Person of the Year. Thank you for your support of AAU, your great athletes, and the sport of wrestling.

Thank you to Jason Loyd for putting me up for this award! Thank you to AAU Wrestling for all the work you do to put this event together! Most of all thank you Nebraska parents for allowing us and trusting us to take your kids to AAU Scholastic Duals. Without your support none of this is possible! I absolutely love being around all these

coaches and athletes. Trust me I am a long way from being person of the year. Without Adam Tranmer and Coach Sinjar this would not be possible thank you both for all your hard work.



Wow, what a fun ride! Les is with daughter Maggie who went 11-0 with 8 pins! Her team went 10-1 and got third overall in the Progressive side.

AAU Wrestling Coach of the Year, George Bergman



Shane Gorder Winner of AAU Wrestling's Sustained Performance of the Year
Shane has continued to lead Montana to new heights. As District Director Shane develops membership, brings in quality tournament workers and officials, organizes international exchanges, he also serves as the National AAU Vice Chairman, and assist with local high school coaching while running his ranch in Sidney Montana.



Shane Gorder with awards presenter Jacob Bough.

AAU Wrestling's **Pairing Master of the Year**, Sarah Reynolds of Billings Montana.

Friends of AAU Wrestling Award

3x Gear is a custom embroidery, screen print, and sublimation company that started out in 2006. It was founded by former 3x NCAA wrestling champions Todd Fuller and Steve Saxlund (hence the name 3x gear). We custom make all kinds of gear and specialize in our signature wrestling singlets.



AAU Wrestling's District Person of the Year, Troy Greder of Iowa.

Honored to receive the AAU District Person of the Year. Special thanks to my wife Kris Greder, who shares my vision of growing girls wrestling. Thank you Jason Loyd and the Iowa AAU Girls Wrestling Board for working tirelessly to build the sport. To all the girls I have coached, thank you for the opportunity to be part of your journey.



Nadine Ihde-Johnston - 2024 AAU National Female Official of the Year (1st ever recipient)

What an unbelievable honor to be selected by the Amateur Athletic Union as the 1st National Female Wrestling Referee of the Year! I am humbled and incredibly grateful for those that have supported, taught, or challenged me to be the best referee possible. Wrestling has brought so much joy and so many wonderful people into my life that I will be forever changed. So happy to share the stage with Mark Kenny and Troy Greider. It's true that if you find real passion, you'll never work a day in your life. Find your passion! If it just happens to be wrestling, I'll see you on the mat 😊. Nadine is an Iowa native who currently lives in Colorado Springs Colorado. When she's not traveling across the country officiating tournaments she enjoys riding motorcycles across the beautiful western states with her husband.

Nadine's sister Liz Henninger posted on Facebook, "So proud of my Baby sister Nadine Ihde-Johnston ! She just received Women's Referee of the Year!! Just doing something that she is very passionate about!! Love you " .



Congrats Nadine, well deserved!

Mark Kenny, AAU National Men's Official of the Year



I cannot put into words how thankful and honored I feel. I was fortunate to receive the National Men's Official of the Year award the other night. I cannot thank my wife and family enough for allowing me to work at so many events every year. To my brothers and sisters in stripes, I thank you for helping me become a better official. Finally, I cannot thank the AAU enough for this award and for hosting such great events for millions of athletes around the country.

