

SPORTS



Jeff Blatnick, the 1984 Olympic Greco-Roman gold medalist, demonstrates some moves to Zach Huxford, 12, from Jackson. (STAFF PHOTO: DARYL STONE)

Pair of Olympic champs inspire local wrestlers

By **DAVE O'SULLIVAN**
STAFF WRITER

HOWELL — Last night was probably the first time Ocean Township High School senior wrestler Greg Soto enjoyed getting tossed all over a wrestling mat.

Soto was the demonstration partner for a pair of Olympic champions who visited Howell High School for a wrestling clinic to promote the

World Championships of Freestyle Wrestling, which will be held Friday through Sunday at Madison Square Garden in New York.

The event was sponsored by the Howell Wrestling Club and was free of charge.

Jeff Blatnick, the 1984 Olympic Greco-Roman gold medalist, and Kendall

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Cross, a 1996 Olympic Freestyle gold medal winner, were on hand to demonstrate a variety of moves that helped them gain international fame. The event drew more than 100 boys of all ages.

"They are very talented athletes and they know exactly what they are doing," said Soto, who advanced to the NJSIAA regionals as a junior last winter. "These are very advanced techniques that they are using, but it's good for the kids to start getting involved with them at a young age. When they get older, it won't be so foreign to them."

Blatnick and Cross demonstrated a variety of techniques which can be used by grammar

school and high school wrestlers. The premise was to show how a wrestler can be more aggressive on his feet. They were moves most young wrestlers struggle to master.

They also were at Howell to provide inspiration. Blatnick has survived several life-threatening car accidents as well as two bouts with cancer, while Cross used his determination to capture a state championship in high school and the 1989 NCAA title while at Oklahoma State.

"I was impressed with the numbers tonight," Cross said. "It tells me this is most likely a hotbed for wrestling."

"I think we have a message. For them to see me and Jeff and understand that we are real people and the thing is to work hard and set goals."

Howell varsity wrestling coach John Gagliano was im-

pressed with the way Blatnick and Cross captivated the attention of the boys.

"You have two great clinicians, two Olympic gold medalists and having kids from all over the state, I think they picked up a lot," Gagliano said. "It's a real good thing for promoting wrestling. It's exciting to have somebody like them come down to your high school and do a clinic."

"Jeff is an outstanding motivational speaker. You can't beat it."

Soto said the Olympians had made an impression on him, and likely every other wrestler in the room.

"Everything I learn from things like this I go home and write down and I look at them constantly," Soto said. "I put them up on my wall so I'm constantly seeing these things."