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Easton Area High School graduate Phil Richards credits wrestling for shaping his successful life - Page 2

Phillip C. Richards knows how to succeed in business and in life – and wrestling taught him how.

"If you can succeed at wrestling, you can succeed at anything," Richards said.

Richards has done pretty much just that.

The 69-year-old Easton native runs North Star Resource Group, one of the nation's most successful full-service financial services firms. He's been honored with the insurance industry's highest honors for an executive. He's the author of the book "25 Secrets to Sustainable Success" and is a much-sought after motivational lecturer. He's a noted philanthropist and a member of Temple University's Board of Trustees.

Richards was inducted Friday night into the National Wrestling Hall of Achievement in a ceremony at the National High School Wrestling Championships in Virginia Beach, Va. The award recognizes wrestlers who have achieved notable success in their careers and represent role models for young athletes. It is presented by the National High School Coaches Association (NHSCA). J. Dennis Hastert, the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, was inducted alongside Richards.

"Wrestling teaches great lessons about life and about business," Richards said. "Individual competition, hard work, conditioning, drilling – the same things that make you successful in wrestling make you successful in business."

Richards was a 1958 District 11 champion at 140 pounds, one of the Red Rovers' 174 D-11 champs over the 63-year-old streak of Easton D-11 winners.

He won a wrestling scholarship to Temple. Richards' business career started in Easton as well – he grew up near Sixth and Walnut streets and delivered the Sunday Philadelphia Bulletin in downtown Easton.

Richards could well have been a state champion in 1958, his senior year, when he went 16-1. But an odd collection of circumstances wound up having a supreme impact on his life that spring.

"My boyhood dream was to attend the U.S. Naval Academy," Richards said. "But the only day to take the test to go to Annapolis was the day of the regional tournament. My coach, John Maitland, tried to convince them to let me take the test a different day, but they wouldn't let me.

"So I never wrestled in regionals or states. And then I failed the test for Annapolis – that was a bummer."

That's the kind of setback that can derail a career, but Richards didn't let it bother him. He enjoyed major success at Temple, captaining the Owls' team in his senior season of 1961-1962 and being elected student body president as well. He was the first member of his family to attend college, a fact he credits to Maitland. As Richards wrote in his book's forward, "(Maitland) altered my course forever."

Temple dropped wrestling as a varsity sport in 1986. Richards wants to change that.

"My goal is to bring wrestling back to Temple," he said. "But I know Temple, like every undergraduate school these days, is dying for money. Adding a sport, especially schools are dropping wrestling, is swimming against the tide. If we can get a lot of donations and contributions to make wrestling self-supporting, Temple would consider bringing it back."

Given Richards' business success, potential Owl wrestling fans should take heart; he doesn't often fail to reach a goal.

Richards' firm was hiring throughout the recession and has grown successfully since he took it over in 1969. Richards, who resides in Phoenix and commutes to his company headquarters in Minneapolis, has shared that success with charities ranging from the Mayo Clinic to a bikes-for-kids program in Minneapolis and Madison, Wis. North Star gives 10 percent of its income to charity.

"There are so many needy causes out there," Richards said. "I'm doing my best to chip in."

Richards ties his success back to wrestling. He noted he had just come from a meeting in Annapolis, Md., with members of the U.S. Navy's elite special operations group, the Seals, and said they told him they identify potential recruits at wrestling championships.

Richards said he understands why and points to a moment that changed his life.

"We were wrestling at Hill School, and Bill Kelley (a two-time District 11 champ) was wrestling a National Prep champion from Hill," Richards recalled. Kelley was unbeaten that season, but (the Hill kid) had never lost in his career, and he was beating Bill 6-2 when he broke a bone in Bill's arm.

"Maitland is about to throw in the towel in the universal gesture of submission, and Bill grabs the towel and says, 'Mr. Maitland, I am going to beat this guy.' Coach Maitland said, 'Bill, you couldn't beat him with two good arms on the best day of your life.'

"I'll be damned, Bill won 7-6. At that moment, as a 17-year-old, I learned that anything is possible. You can do anything you set your mind to. I learned a lesson that day."

And learned it well.

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