

FUND-RAISER

6th Annual Strongman Challenge the best yet

Crowd of 300, 60-plus competitors help raise \$18,000 for cancer research and scholarships

BY J.C. BAUMULLER
Sports Editor

OLD TAPPAN – The College/Pro U220 winner at the 6th Annual Michael F. LaViola Strongman Challenge needed overtime to be determined at the June 28 event.

A three-way tie between Brian Kelly, Jordan Migliore and Joe Trumbetti was decided by a special event – the Farmers Hold for Time. Each contestant picked up a pair of “farmers handles” weighing 150 pounds each and held them by their side at arm’s length for as long as they could.

Migliore went first and he held them for 1:48.65 minutes. Trumbetti went next and held them for just under a minute. Kelly picked them up and when he reached 1:49 minutes timekeeper “Big Mike” Capriglione declared Kelly the winner.

That ended a near-perfect day. The weather was warm, not hot, and there were more competitors than at any of the previous strongman challenges. As a result the event took in more money than ever before for the Michael LaViola Foundation, which was formed in 2009 to raise money for Pediatric Sarcomas research and

two scholarships for deserving graduates of NV/Old Tappan High School.

Michael F. LaViola was a former football player for NV/Old Tappan who died Feb. 2, 2008, a day before his beloved N.Y. Giants won Super Bowl XLII over the New England Patriots. He was only 20 when he lost his battle to Synovial Sarcoma, a rare form of cancer that is difficult to diagnose and treat. This year’s event was on what would have been LaViola’s 27th birthday.

“Varsity House came to us [in 2009] because Michael worked out there with his football buddies,” Michael’s dad, Michael C. (Mike) LaViola, said of the inaugural Strongman Challenge. “The first one was an impromptu event. It went well and continued. It got better and better and better.”

A REUNION

There were plenty of repeat performers on hand to compete. Chris Kenneally, a perennial winner years ago came back to compete after taking some time off. There were also several “retirees” present. Most, like Gene Oakley, NVOT class of 2006 and Mike Shannon, NVOT class of 2010,

chose not to compete this year.

Oakley is working in construction nowadays and Shannon, after getting a degree in accounting, is a paratrooper in the U.S. Army.

Former Old Tappan linebacker Sammy Massaro, who graduated in 2009, was back out there competing, after a hiatus of a few years, at the College/Pro level.

Massaro is coaching in a youth basketball league at Stone Point Park in Old Tappan, run by former Golden Knights multi-sports star Thomas Messina.

“It’s a good experience for me,” said Massaro. “[Councilman] Guy Carnazza is in charge. He brings in a couple of new guys each year (to coach) and others transition out. The program is growing.”

“We have three teams of fifth and sixth graders with 13 kids on each team. They compete against each other before they will play together as freshmen at Old Tappan. We want to keep the kids busy.”

Park Ridge grad Matt Misley and Pascack Valley alum Yamir Ortiz, who always found themselves in one of the Top 3 positions on the podium in previous strongman challenges, sat this one out. But they vowed “to come out of retirement next year.”

“A lot of them pushed the event on Facebook,” said Mike LaViola. “That’s why we had such a big turnout. Varsity House estimated 300 people, including 60-plus participants.”

‘SHOW THEM HOW’

One person who came out of retirement this year was Migliore,

who wanted to become the first athlete to win at two different weight classes. While he was a football lineman at SUNY-Albany he weighed around 270 and won the College/Pro Over 220 competition in 2011. He didn’t compete in 2013 but was ready to go in 2014.

“I came out of retirement to show them how to do it,” he said, laughing, just before the final event – the truck pull. “There’s a little trash-talking along the way. This is all for a good cause but there is no better motivation than to try to beat your friends.”

He posted the fastest time in the truck pull – that is until recent NVOT graduate Rocky Giovinazzo bested Migliore’s time.

Migliore would have won this year’s challenge outright but he came up a couple of inches short of the finish line on the tire flip event. So he lost valuable seconds when he had to flip it over one more time.

“I absolutely wanted to win,” he said. “But it’s for a good cause.”

TRAINING FOR COLLEGE

Matt Goodman, who just completed his first year at SUNY-Cortland, agreed.

“This is the biggest event around,” he said. “It’s all for a good cause.”

Goodman enjoyed his time at Cortland, calling it “a good fit for me.”

“It was definitely a lot different from high school,” he said. “I was prepared from training with my brother (Dan) and Joe [Riggio]. I was ready to go.”

Strongman Winners

Jr. Varsity/Jr. High:

1st Steve Crevani, Old Tappan

2nd Sol Benishay, Closter

3rd Shane Griffith, Westwood

Varsity:

1st Greg Schwartz, NV/Demarest

2nd Michael Melograno, Nutley

3rd Zach Aisharif, NV/Old Tappan

College under 220:

1st Brian Kelly, Springfield

2nd Jordan Migliore, SUNY Albany

3rd Joe Trumbetti, Johns Hopkins

College over 220:

1st Marty Scheuring, Johns Hopkins

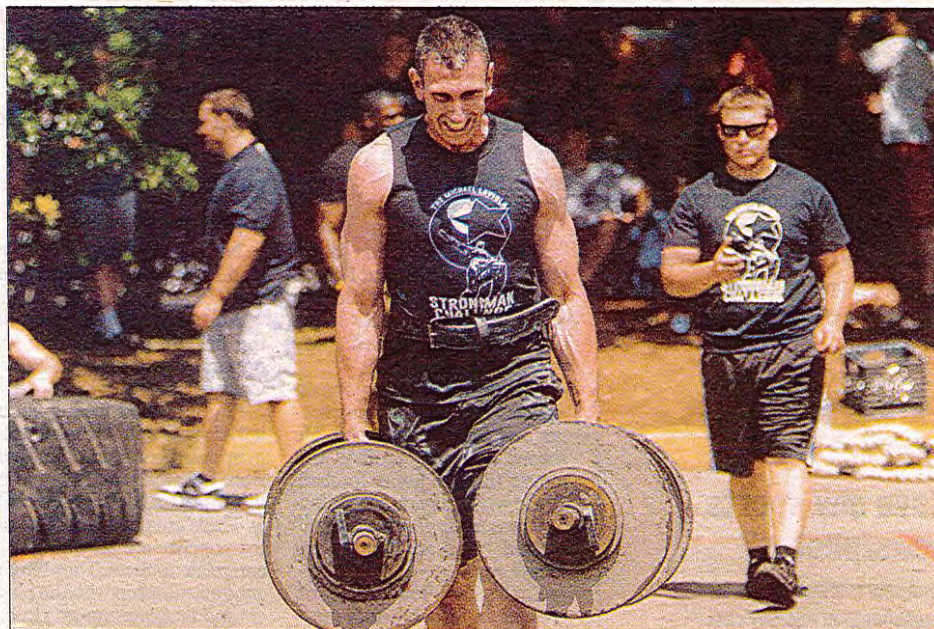
2nd Tom Hayes, Union College

3rd James McEnery, Assumption

There was a lot of talk about the training programs at Varsity House. Many of the competitors swear by the gym.

Former Bergenfield offensive lineman/linebacker Juwan Griffith-James was competing in his second strongman challenge.

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DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jordan Migliore fell just short of being the first athlete to win a Strongman Challenge in two different weight classes.

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"I love it – every moment of it," he said. "You lift, eat all you want and have fun with the guys you lift with. The food is phenomenal and a lot of college kids are back which means it's harder and more competitive."

"The conditioning [at Varsity House] will put me in shape for West Point Prep. The competitive nature will be with me the next five years. I'll always come back here for the coaching and the workouts."

Former Old Tappan running back Zach Alsharif, who is heading to Colgate in the fall, enjoys the competitive nature a gym brings out in him and the other athletes.

"You can work out by yourself and you will get better," he said. "But when you compete with the guy next to you, if he lifts more you want to lift more than him. The atmosphere here is great. We

get better just by competing against each other.

"I've been coming here since sixth grade when it was in a warehouse in Northvale. They are always coming up with innovative ways to make you better. And it shows."

CONSISTENCY

Dan Goodman, who is the general manager of Varsity House, says there is no magic formula.

"It's consistency," he said. "It's all about the kids seeing the same guys day in and day out. They see we practice what we preach. They see how committed we are to this. I wish I had had a Varsity House when I was playing."

Goodman's family is a big part of the gym.

"Matt and my mom work here," he said. "They love this place. We treat it like a football team. Good football teams are extended families. There are agendas here. We've had some top recruits come here and they're treated the same way – no special

treatment. Varsity House is a little humbling to some people."

But everyone was here for the LaViola family. When the Strongman Challenge first began in 2009 many of the participants were either teammates or rivals of Michael on the football field. Now everyone knows what the cause is even if they didn't know Michael personally.

Michael's parents, Mary and Mike and his sister Katie are fixtures at the event each year. They track down sponsors who donate food for the athletes and the fans who attend the event. They also work closely with the borough of Old Tappan and the Varsity House staff to ensure a successful event.

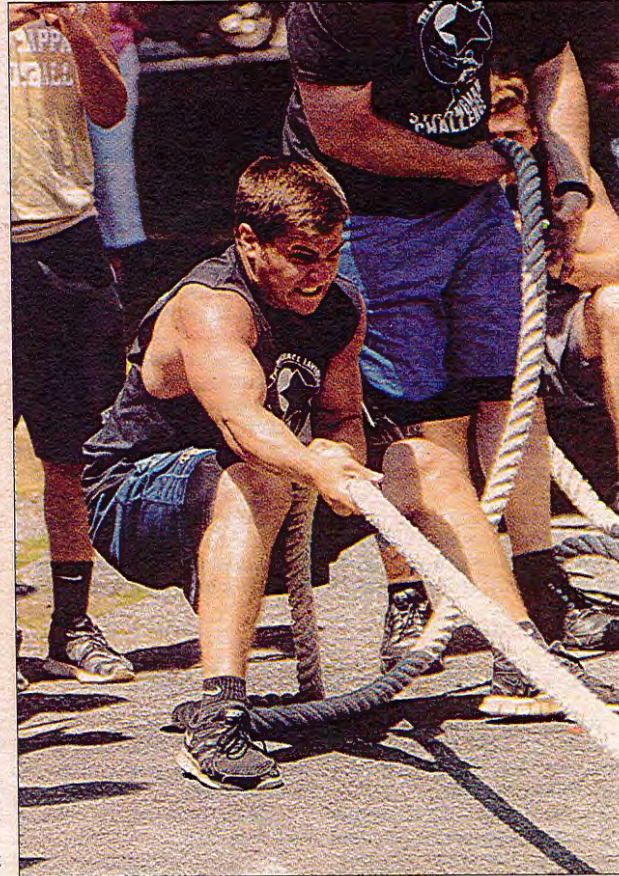
"I want to thank the town for its assistance," Mike LaViola said. "The ambulance corps is on site, the police department provides a crossing guard and the fire department is at the ready. We really are thankful to the borough of Old Tappan, especially to Guy Carnazza and the Mayor and Council."

As a result of the hard work by everyone, Michael's foundation will net about \$18,000 this year.

"Our thanks to Varsity House," said Mike LaViola. "They do a great job. They do it all."

"We work," added Mary, "but they put their heart and soul into it."

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DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Former Old Tappan linebacker Rocky Giovinazzo had the fastest time in the 7,500-pound truck pull event of the 2014 Strongman Challenge at Varsity House.