

Which was Program of the Decade in North Jersey?



Ridgewood boys and girls track and cross-country

This is not a cop-out. But frankly, even with nearly 50 years of experience, I can't separate one of the six programs that make up the Ridgewood boys and girls cross country, indoor and outdoor track teams.

They share head coaches. They have outstanding assistants throughout the years — usually alumni or alumnae, but also “outsiders” like current weight coach Warren Schoepfler.

They have stars — 14 members of the All-Decade cross country and track teams.

But most of all they have championships — an astounding 122 in the last decade in league, county, and state sectional competition, 56 percent of the 220 possible titles. Here's the breakdown:

CROSS-COUNTRY (48 of 80): Four boys and seven girls in Bergen County group meets; three boys and seven girls in the Bergen Meet of Champions; 10 boys and six girls in sectionals, five boys and six girls in leagues.

INDOOR TRACK (30 of 60): Five boys and three girls in leagues; six boys and five girls in sectionals, six boys and five girls in Bergen Relays.

OUTDOOR TRACK (44 of 80): Seven boys and five girls in leagues, seven boys and six girls in Bergen Relays; four boys and four girls in Bergen Groups and eight boys and three girls in state sectionals.

Add in the 2016 and 2019 girls Group 4 indoor state titles, and a combined 10 State Meet of Champions cross country finishes, all of whom led to top 10 finishes and six to state medals, and you've got a spectacular decade. You pick which season is best — I'm not going to do it.

— Paul Schwartz

Northern Highlands girls soccer

Northern Highlands rose to prominence with a dramatic stretch of dominance unmatched this decade in New Jersey girls' soccer.

Choosing this public school as my Program of the Decade is as easy as 1-2-3.

For starters, the Highlanders' won six state Group 3 championships in the 2010s, the most NJSIAA titles this decade by a girls' soccer team in the Garden State. They also won seven Bergen County crowns.

Their success under coach Tara Madigan from 2011 to 2018 was especially staggering. They compiled a record of 179-4-4, featuring a state-record 65-game winning streak and state-record 88-game unbeaten streak from 2011 to 2014.

During that golden eight-year era, Northern Highlands won its seven Bergen titles and six state crowns. Their eight consecutive sectional titles represent the state record for a public school.

Northern Highlands dominated the NorthJersey.com All-Decade team. The Highlanders had 13 of the 49 selections, including six on first team: Clare Shea (Class of 2014), Hana Kerner (2015), Morgan Busacca (2016), Casey Richards (2016), Eva Hurm (2017) and Sara Ghorashi (2019).

Along the way, Northern Highlands was recognized as a national powerhouse. The 2018 team won a record-tying fourth consecutive Bergen County title, a Group 3 crown, was 22-1 and finished tied for third in the USA TODAY/United Soccer Coaches Super 25 rankings.

— Greg Mattura

Darren Cooper, Greg Tartaglia, Sean Farrell, Paul Schwartz and Greg Mattura

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These are the programs that everyone else was trying to chase this decade.

They are the winners. They are the measuring stick. They are the best. Just say their name and everyone else knows what you mean.

Five members of the NorthJersey.com HS sports staff make their selections on which they consider the Program of the Decade.

Indian Hills softball

It's not easy to be a public school sports program anymore. Non-Public powerhouses often grab your most talented athletes. The youth sports machine has taken away others who would have been thrilled to play for their town, but by the time they're 14 years old, they're done. They want to do anything other than play sports.

So public school coaches have to be creative. They have to turn the negatives into positives. They need to hammer home the lure of playing with your friends, not in front of thousands, but in front of hundreds of fans who have your best interest at heart. They need to play up the history, the alumni, while mixing in just enough demands with fun to keep the kids engaged.

Which is what the Indian Hills softball program does better than anyone. The Braves have provided a template for other public schools to follow.

Joe Leicht is at the heart of the effort. He uses his former players to work and coach with the younger players in town. He has kept detailed records and history on his program, so the girls know they are playing for something more than themselves.

He's hard on them. Ask any Braves softball player what it's like to get the “Joe Leicht Look” of incredulous disappointment after something goes wrong, then ask them how much fun it was to pose for prom pictures with a softball bat while he looks on beaming with pride.

It's not easy, and Leicht works hard at it. That's probably why more public schools aren't able to achieve the same type of success. Indian Hills has played in six Bergen County softball finals, winning two — hey, there are many other Bergen County tournaments (especially on the girls side) that aren't dominated by non-public teams. The Braves won state titles in 2010, 2013 and 2014.

It's not easy to be a public school program anymore, but you can succeed in this environment. Indian Hills proves it.

— Darren Cooper

Ridgewood football

My pick for Program of the Decade was solidified in the aftermath of the Maroons' hectic, 41-37 victory over Union in last month's North Group 5 regional final.

Senior Jack Wittmaack brought the trophy over to the MetLife Stadium 50-yard line and planted it on the NFL logo, prompting teammates to plant themselves alongside. “This is our house now,” he said.

The linebacker recalled running onto the same field earlier in the decade. His Ridgewood sixth-grade squad played a scrimmage at halftime of the 2013 Jets/Giants preseason game, and many of those Junior Jets were senior members of the Maroons' title team.

“It all makes sense now,” Wittmaack said with a laugh. “This is where it all started.”

That encapsulates the things that make a true program. Success at all levels, from youth on up. Consistency — every Ridgewood team from Pee-Wee to varsity runs the Wing-T system that coach Chuck Johnson has been teaching them throughout their careers. Every Maroon to suit up since the mid-1980s has.

Ridgewood finished the 2010s with five appearances in sectional finals, a trio of North 1, Group 5 titles and its first perfect season (12-0 in 2016) since 1956.

Although Johnson was unable to coach the final seven games due to illness, his plans for the start of the next decade remain the same. Ridgewood's team-building Bench-A-Thon in June. A summer of teaching offensive intricacies at his Wing-T camp.

And then, back to work with the Program of the Decade.

— Greg Tartaglia

Immaculate Heart swimming

Let's start with this: how many programs were the best team in North Jersey for the entire decade? How many won state and county titles at every step of the way?

That's the claim to fame for Immaculate Heart, which is unrivaled in the water. It's the surest thing in high school sports, since major upsets in swimming are almost statistically impossible.

The Blue Eagles have won all 21 Bergen Meet of Champions titles, often scoring twice as much as the next-best team. They've won more than 90 percent of meets this past decade and will start the new one on the verge of history. Immaculate Heart has a chance to break its own NJSIAA record with a 13th straight state title.

Rivals are quick to point out that the Blue Eagles can draw club stars from all over the region, but their success shouldn't be taken for granted. The faces change every season, but there is never an off day or off year at Immaculate Heart. There is always another swimmer, another younger sister, ready to step up.

As former coach Jason Schlereth once said, “Tradition never graduates”.

— Sean Farrell