

The 2007 Sports Scene Was Year of Many Firsts

But a Stunning Upset in August Took the Cake

By RICK MELLERUP

There's no doubt 2007 was a year of firsts in the Southern Ocean County sports scene. Last week, while recounting the 20th through 11th most important area sports stories of the year, I mentioned a couple: the first Endless Summer Triathlon & Duathlon in Beach Haven and Clark Harris, the first-ever local football player to knock on the door of the NFL.

But folks, I'm here to tell you that bbbbbb, you ain't seen nothing yet. So let's get going, shall we, and remember the Top 10 sports stories of 2007, a year we never will forget.

NUMBER 10: A Barnegat High junior, Jen Holly, won that school's first-ever Meet of Champions crown when she soared 12 feet in the pole vault competition. What made her victory even more impressive was that although she had won the South Jersey Group II title with an 11-foot vault, she had stumbled a bit in the state group finals, only managing a 10-6 effort. I thought maybe the pressure was getting to her, but obviously I thought wrong. Her 12-footer was a personal best and it came at the perfect time. While we're talking pole vaulting, I would be amiss not to mention the second-place finisher with a vault of 11-6, Southern Regional's Ashley Furlong. I said last week that the level of athletic competition in this area had reached levels I would have thought unbelievable just a decade ago. Well, there's pretty dramatic proof, two locals finishing one-two in the state's premier track meet.

NUMBER 9: It took Barnegat only three years to produce a MOC crown. It took the Southern boys 49 years to do the same, but the long dry spell came to an end this past winter when senior John Gray won the 800 in the NJSIAA indoor Meet of Champions. Like Holly, Gray peaked at just the right time. He had just finished fourth in the Group IV state meet and he only had the 10th fastest qualifying time going into the MOC, meaning he didn't run in the seeded heat, giving him a distinct disadvantage. But he came through big time to end Southern's drought.

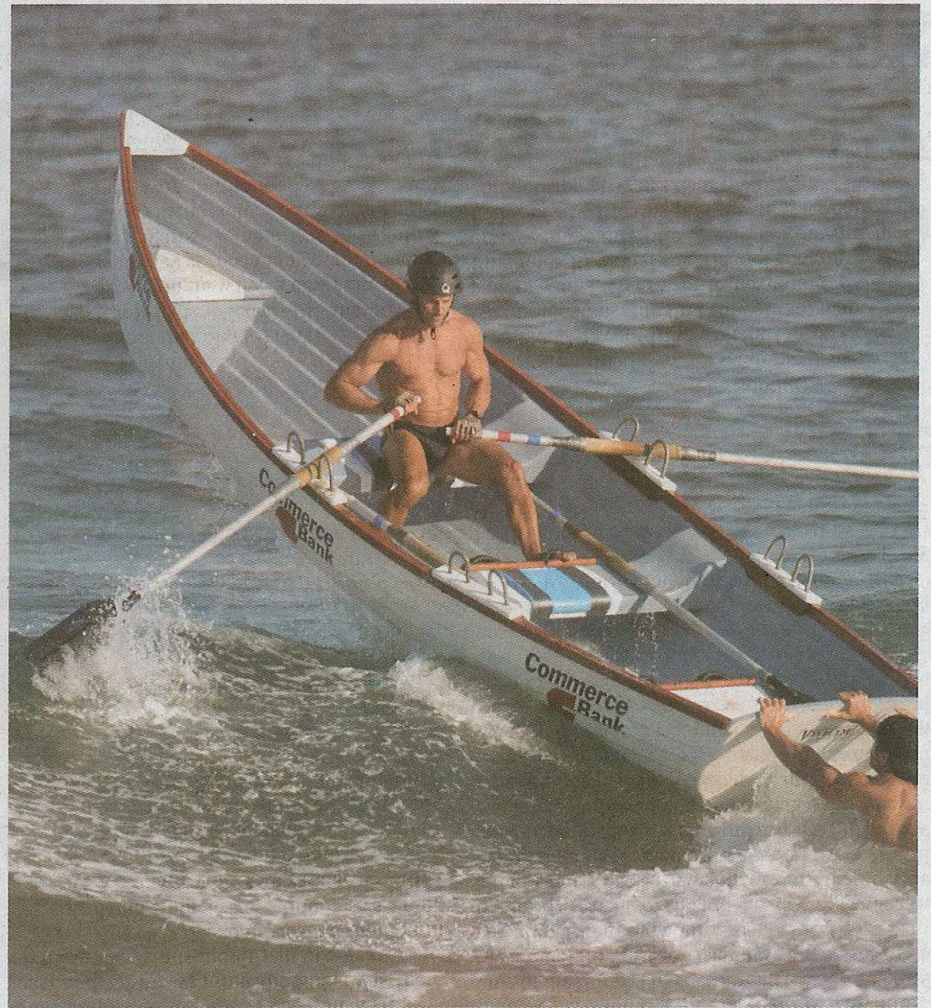
NUMBER 8: Southern Ocean County has had an athlete with local connections compete in the Olympic Games before—I recall a female

moguls skier (don't ask me to remember her name), and of course there was Don "Tarzan" Bragg, who took home gold in the pole vault in the 1960 Games. But 2008 will be, to my knowledge, the first time two athletes associated with Southern Ocean County—LBI, to be more specific—will be representing the United States. Jarred Shoemaker, a perennial Dog Day Race winner and a former Harvey Cedars lifeguard, will be competing in the triathlon. Meanwhile, Sarah Mergenthaler, who used to be an instructor at the Barnegat Light Yacht Club, will be sailing in the 470-class. The 2008 Olympics promised to be interesting anyway, being staged as they will in Beijing. But sporting events are always more interesting to follow when you have a horse, or in this case, two horses, in the race.

NUMBER 7: Talking about races, the Southern Regional High School girls cross country team won a big one in October when it took the Ocean County Championships by upsetting the top-ranked team in the Shore Conference, Monsignor Donovan. The team was led by Jill Smith, a junior competing in her first cross country campaign. Smith is a true star—she went on to take the state Group IV title and to finish second in the MOC. But the team's depth was also amazing—all five Southern runners finished in the top 21 in the Ocean County meet.

NUMBER 6: Now that we're on the subject of female runners from Southern Regional, we're going to have to stay there for a while. No exaggeration, they form quite the contingent! The school's indoor track team, for example, captured its first-ever (I told you this was a year of firsts) state group relay title in January. It was an amazing performance in so many ways. The team smashed the old school record in the distance medley of 12:05.14, and I mean smashed—obliterated, crushed, shredded—replacing it with a new time of 11:59.20. It was a meet mark, the sixth fastest time in New Jersey history and, get this, the fastest time of the year in the entire country! Not the state, the whole U.S.A.! The team also won the 4x400 and the sprint medley relay while finishing second in the shuttle hurdles and fifth in the 3,200 relay.

NUMBER 5: The winter was just a warm-up period for Southern's fleet-footed females.



Jack Reynolds

MONEY IN THE BANK: Surf City captain Mark Dileo and his teammates took home the gold in the 46th Annual Long Beach Island Beach Patrol Association Lifeguard Tournament.

They went on to have a spring season that will live in the annals of history. And don't think I'm guilty of hyperbole; check this out: The girls simply a) won the distance medley in the prestigious Penn Relays, b) took the Shore Conference title, c) destroyed the competition in the South Jersey Group Championships (the girls earned 95 points while the runner-up could only manage 59) and d) took home the school's first-ever state Group IV championship. The team's leaders, the incredible Danielle Tauro and the almost as sensational Jill Smith, ended the season on a high note, with Tauro taking MOC gold in the 1,600 (for the fourth straight year) and Smith winning the 800. Was there anything these kids didn't win this year?

NUMBER 4: OK, so it wasn't a first, but it was still damn impressive—Southern's Frank Molinaro won his third state wrestling championship in Atlantic City in March. He's one of only 21 grapplers ever to have accomplished that feat. The 140-pound champ had plenty of company in A.C., what with Luke Lanno finishing second at 145 (in a very controversial match due to the fact he was called for stalling with five seconds left in regulation while leading 1-0) and Glenn Carson (only a sophomore) ending up the runner-up at 215 pounds.

NUMBER 3: They didn't, unfortunately, end up with a state title. But the Southern Regional High School boys volleyball team set a record that might very well last for decades. The top-seeded team lost in the state tournament semifinals to the second seed (and eventual state champs), East Brunswick, 25-19 and 31-29. But before that first loss of the season the Rams had racked up 40—that's right, 40—straight wins, a new state mark. And they earned many of their victories against some of the top-ranked teams in the state. They won at home, they won on the road, they won everywhere they went. Think about it, 40 wins, that would be a great total for most teams for two years! Hell, many a team would like to earn that many victories over the course of three seasons. Awesome.

NUMBER 2: It's time for the

most incredible first of them all. The Southern Regional football team went out this year and won its first playoff football game in the half-century-long history of the school by beating Washington Township, 21-7. And they did it on the road, no less, against a higher-seeded team. Yeah, Toms River North, the eventual South Jersey Group IV champ, clobbered the Rams, 33-0, in the next round. But it was, far and away, the greatest year in Southern football history, finishing 8-3 and, let me repeat this, winning a playoff game.

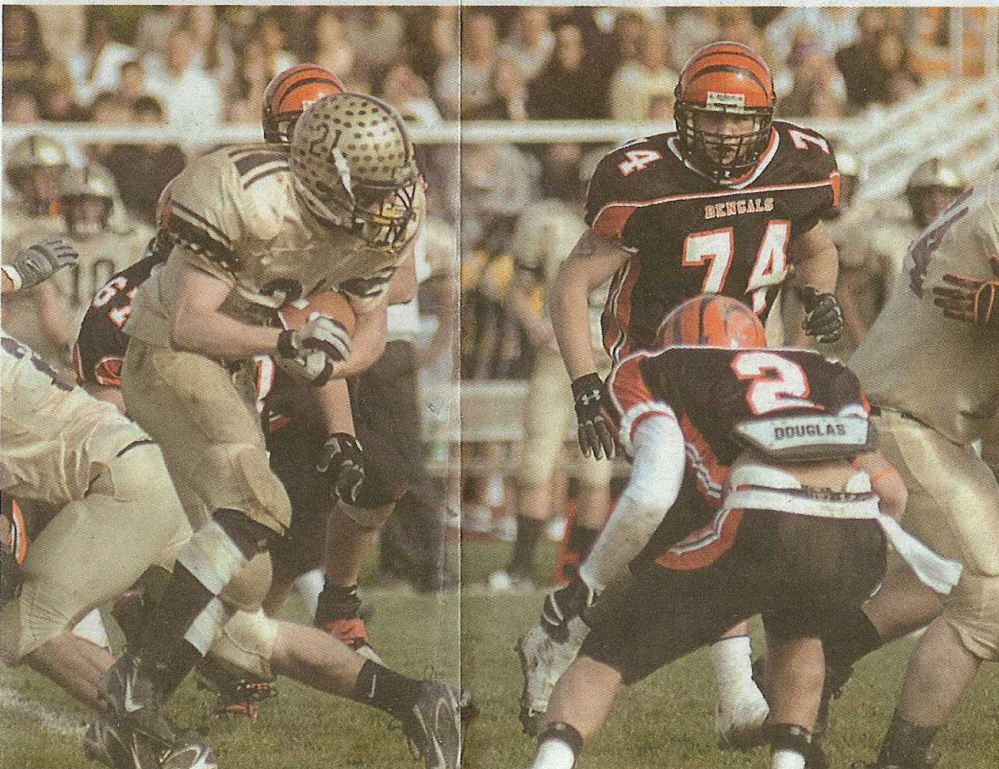
NUMBER 1: I've been writing about sports in these parts for, God, almost a third of my life. One of the things I have to attend to each year is the annual Long Beach Island Beach Patrol Association Lifeguard Tournament. To tell you the truth I was tiring of the job—every year it was either Long Beach Township or Barnegat Light capturing the coveted crown—and I was busy appearing onstage at Beach Haven's Surfflight Theatre so I passed the assignment on to a new reporter here at The SandPaper, Juliet Kaszas-Hoch. Just my luck—Surf City won! It was the first time since 1980 (when I hadn't even heard of LBI) that Surf City emerged victorious and the first time since 1989 (my first year on the Island and three years before I came to work for this publication) that a team other than the Township or the Light had toasted victory. It's clearly the number one sports story of the year in Southern Ocean County and damn it if I didn't miss it. But hundreds of you didn't, and I hear tell it was one of the most exciting tournaments in the event's 46-year history.

Wow, what a year, wouldn't you agree? In fact, so much was happening I just realized I left a couple of pretty neat (yep, I'm of the Beaver's generation) stories out. The Southern Regional boys swimming team, for example, had an incredible 12-1 record and won the Ocean County Championships, the first (of course) team outside of Toms River ever to have done so. The Pinelands Regional cheerleaders not only won an Ocean County title last winter but finished fifth out of 47 teams in a prestigious national competition at Walt Disney World.

Yep, I'm sure I missed another important story or two as well. But for once that wouldn't be a first.

Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and, folks, I can't wait to see what 2008 looks like!

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Ryan Morrill

SOUTHERN LIGHTS: The Rams had their best season ever, capped by a playoff win and a Thanksgiving victory over daughter school Barnegat. Brad Gesser (with ball) led the team's rushing attack.