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## Linemen get their day to shine

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*EDITORIAL INTERN*

The inspiration for creating a competition tailored to offensive and defensive linemen first came to Steve Hladio in his living room.

Hladio, a former offensive line coach at the University of Albany, was watching the World's Strongest Man contest on ESPN when he began to draw comparisons between the strength and tenacity of the participants and those of the linemen he had coached.

"I started thinking this would be a fun thing for offensive lineman because there's nothing fun for them to do," Hladio said. "The only time you really realize linemen exist is when they get a penalty."

As the ideas popped into his head, Hladio scribbled them down on a napkin, hoping to assemble a plan that could provide linemen with additional, competitive opportunities. A year later, those napkin notes spawned the inaugural New Jersey Linemen Challenge.

The competition features high school linemen throughout the state and tests their strength, agility and mental toughness by placing them in several strenuous individual and team competitions.

"It gives the big men a chance to have their own shining star," Hladio said. "In football, those guys are like unknown soldiers. There are quarterback competitions and 7-on-7 tournaments, so at least this gives a line a chance to compete and see who is the best."

Players from Edison, North Brunswick, Monroe, Sayreville, Woodbridge, Governor Livingston, Pompton Lakes and Jonathan Dayton high schools competed in the fourth annual N.J. Linemen Challenge Saturday in Springfield. More was on the line for the linemen than simple bragging rights. They were also trying to use the stage to showcase their skills and impress University of New Haven head coach Peter Rossomando, who helped Hladio and Dayton coach Joe Goerge organize the day's activities.

"You definitely have to use this as an opportunity to evaluate players and their talent for the next level," Rossomando said. "As a coach, it's always in the back of my mind to look at the players in front of me."

During the first portion of the contest, all the players competed against one another in the individual activities, which consisted of a bench press, a tractor-tire flip, a "sack the quarterback" drill, an agility exercise, and a one-man sled-push challenge.

For the bench press, the linemen were challenged to bench as many repetitions of 185 pounds as possible in 30 seconds. With the help of his three spotters, Monroe junior Morgan Klag trounced the rest of the field, finishing with 25 reps and beating the next closest competitor by six.

"While I was benching I was just doing my best because I knew my team was counting on me," Klag said. "When I heard the best overall score before me was 19, I was thinking to myself, 'I can do a lot more.' It felt real good to do well almost like if we had won a game."

In the sack-the-quarterback drill, linemen had to weave through a small obstacle course and finish by touching the last mat, which represented the QB. Monroe's Brian Dennis recorded the best time in the challenge, completing the course in 8.6 seconds.

For the agility exercise, players had to push a shiver ball, which has a 3-foot diameter, around four cones to record the best time. Pompton Lakes' Anthony Pelligrino and Woodbridge's Dan Donahue were the top two finishers, concluding the contest in 13.33 and 14.27 seconds, respectively.

Despite all of Monroe's solid finishes, it was Edison senior Travis Woods who stole the show with his performance, finishing in first place in both the tractor-tire flip and the one-man sled-push competitions. It only took Woods 13.91 seconds to flip the tractor tire over 10 times and 5.86 seconds to push the sled 20 yards down the field. As a result, Woods ended the individual competition atop the leaderboard with 29.5 points and claimed the bronze Iron Lineman trophy.

"After last year's competition I couldn't even sleep," Woods said. "It was a wake-up call. I was upset because I didn't perform as well as I could, so when I came back this year I had a chip on my shoulder to prove to everyone what I could do."

After a 45-minute intermission, the linemen returned to the field to participate in the team competitions. The first activity for the teams was a relay obstacle course that combined all of the teams' individual activities into one event.

Following the relay race, the teams competed in time trials for three events — the farmers walk, team sled push, and the vehicle push. For the vehicle push, teams were being timed as they pushed a truck 20 yards down the field, while the farmers walk forced team members to carry two 80-pound dumbbells 25 yards to their partners.

Monroe ultimately finished with the highest cumulative score and received the Iron Line award for its strong performance as a cohesive unit. Finishing in second place was Sayreville, while Woodbridge rounded out the top three scorers to cap the final session of the annual lineman challenge.

"The linemen are the toughest men on the field even though we don't get the glamour and glory," Klag said. "The skills players know who the best are on the field. They know who makes the blocks and who gives them the chance to score touchdowns. Running backs and wide receivers would be nothing without us."

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