

# Starry Night

## Eleven Inductees Take Their Spots In Hall

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*The 36th annual Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame Banquet was held Monday night at the Lakewood Rod & Gun Club. Above are members of the Class of 2017. Seated, from the left, are: Julie VanDeMar, daughter of the late Doc Malinoski; Sammy LaMancuso; Mike Sayers; Deb Palmer; and Paul Cooley. Standing, from the left, are: Dave Polechetti; Maceo Wofford; Charlie LaDuca; Jake Ensign; Sam Restivo and Bob Patterson. P-J photo by Scott Kindberg*

LAKWOOD — Long before Charlie LaDuca was coaching baseball, he grew up spending many afternoons with his father at the old Offerman Stadium in Buffalo. It was there that they rooted on the Bisons and it was also there that the son's love for the game was born.

"(My dad's) older brother, my uncle Art, was drafted by the Boston Braves as a pitcher," said the former Pine Valley coach during his induction speech at the 36th annual Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame Banquet on Monday night, "so there is a pitching background in my DNA."

But Uncle Art's career path went in a different direction than the diamond.

"(His) mother wanted him to be a priest," LaDuca said, "so being a fine, respectful Italian boy, he gave up baseball and became a priest. He chose to save souls. I chose saving games, because, really, what's more important?"

The last line drew a laugh from the sellout crowd at the Lakewood Rod & Gun Club, but — for at least one night anyway — sports and the accomplishments of the 11 members of the Class of 2017 were priority No. 1.



*CSHOF inductee Deb Palmer, left, is pictured with Duke University women's volleyball coach Jolene Nagel at Monday night's banquet. P-J photo by Scott Kindberg*

Joining LaDuca as the newest members of the CSHOF were Paul Cooley (coaching/officiating), Jake Ensign (bowhunting), Sammy LaMancuso (auto racing), the late Doc Malinoski (coaching), Deb Palmer (coaching), Bob Patterson (athlete/contributor), Dave Polechetti (coaching), Sam Restivo (football), Mike Sayers (track & field) and Maceo Wofford (basketball).

The enshrinement of that group, which brings the total number of inductees to 183, means that their plaques will hang permanently in the CSHOF museum on West Third Street in downtown Jamestown.

The latest inductees certainly have worthy athletic credentials, but it was the journey they took to ultimately join the greatest that have ever competed in Chautauqua County that stood out the most last night.

Following is a capsule summary of each one of the honorees:

– Cooley: From growing up with no electricity, no indoor plumbing and beginning his education in a one-room schoolhouse, the former Cassadaga Valley coach and Board 39 basketball official said all his years in athletics were really not about the wins or the paychecks, but "knowing you made a difference in someone else's life."



*Members of Panama's state-champion volleyball team are pictured at the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame on Monday evening at the Lakewood Rod & Gun Club. P-J photo by Scott Kindberg*

He added: "The Bible says, 'Give and it will be given to you,' and that's so true of my life."

Before he left the podium, Cooley paid special tribute to his wife of 51 years — "she's definitely the wind beneath my wings" — and then offered the crowd of 460 some advice.

"My challenge to all of you is to dream," he said, "but in dreaming include others."

— Ensign: One of only about 20 hunters in the world who has bagged all 29 species of recognized big-game animals that are native to North America, the Busti resident said he has been hunting "since Spam was only known as a type of a canned meet."

As a direct result of his passion for the outdoors, Ensign said he has had the opportunity to "visit parts of the world that many people would only see on a National Geographic documentary or the Discovery Channel.

"I believe it is passion that makes a softball or baseball player take extra batting practice, makes a runner run that extra mile, makes a basketball player practice those extra foul shots, or drives a bowhunter to climb that last mountain."

— LaDuca: The former Pine Valley coach and current assistant at Fredonia Central School admitted he's always been competitive and loves a challenge, but "baseball gives me all I can handle."

"(It) is filled with teachable moments," he said. "As a player, the opportunity to learn about yourself. As a coach, the opportunity to teach life lessons to your players.

"So what is the biggest draw that keeps me playing after all these years? In the end, I don't want to be judged by my win-loss record, but rather by the type of people my athletes have become. Are they good sons, husbands, fathers, citizens? Have they generated more of the same?"

— LaMancuso: An admitted "car guy" since he was a kid, the 87-year-old Jamestown resident said his first race was 70 years ago, which was about five years after he first got behind the wheel.

In fact, LaMancuso drove a 1935 Ford to Jefferson Junior High School one day only to discover that he had parked illegally in the parking lot.

"Because of my age, I got myself into a little bit of a (jam)," he said.

A few years later, he found himself on the race track where he competed until the 1970s. Since then, LaMancuso has been the sport's biggest ambassador.

"This is an honor I'll never forget," he said.

— Malinoski: Julie VanDeMar said that her father had opportunities to try college coaching, but the small school, specifically Mayville Central, was where his heart was.

"It was his calling," she said. "He often drove the bus and lined the football field."

Or, in 1958, he satisfied a bet and walked from Chautauqua High School to Mayville after the Eagles defeated the Indians in a basketball game.

"It didn't matter if you were 5-6 or 6-5 or if you were 130 pounds or 250, you just had to have the heart to be on a team," she said.

— Palmer: The longtime volleyball and softball coach at Panama Central School said she was "lucky" to have worked and lived in that district.

"There's none better," Palmer said, "but you better win."

And winning has become a habit for the Panthers, most notably last fall when the Lady Panthers captured a New York State Public High School Athletic Association Class D volleyball title in Glens Falls.

Of course, Palmer was there.

"I couldn't have been prouder," she said. "Love that Panama blue!"

— Patterson: The man credited with, among other things, the growth of rec leagues in Dunkirk, Patterson was also an accomplished athlete and IAABO Board 39 basketball official for decades.

Before he left the podium, he strongly urged the banquet guests to "encourage our young athletes to put away their cellphone, their XBoxes and go out the door" and play sports. Patterson specifically mentioned the number of athletes that came out of the county and played at the highest levels, both collegiately and professionally.

— Polechetti: The former Fredonia boys basketball and girls softball coach recalled growing up on Deer Street in Dunkirk and watched as an older neighbor, Bob Wisniewski, did amazing things in multiple sports at Dunkirk High School.

"He took a young boy under his wing," Polechetti said.

From those formative years watching some of the best athletes that the North County had to offer, Polechetti carved out quite a career in the coaching ranks as he and his friend and assistant coach, John Bongiovanni, guided teams to state tournaments in both basketball and softball.

— Restivo: Growing up on Jamestown's west side, Restivo and his buddies were constantly playing some sport. In Restivo's case, his athleticism took him to the highest levels of collegiate football where he earned a full ride to Florida State University.

But his accomplished gridiron career didn't make him lose his sense of humor.

"My sophomore year, I called my dad to tell him I received my first varsity letter," Restivo said. "He said he'd put the letter in a safe place and when I get home he'd be glad to read it to me."

The banquet crowd broke out in laughter.

But Restivo's accomplishments as an athlete were nothing to laugh about. By many accounts, he was the finest football ever to play at Jamestown High School, but he's never lost his humbleness.

As Florida State football coach Bobby Bowden taught him, "Be concerned more about character than reputation."

— Sayers: The masters track and field athlete was introduced by his son, Joe, who asked the crowd a series of questions related to athletic achievement. Those who could answer in the affirmative could remain standing.

Joe's last question was: "How many of you have been No. 1 in the world in any age group in any sport?"

The only one left standing was his father.

A world record-holder in the javelin in his age group, Sayers has carved out a career that began in high school and is still going strong.

"It's still fun for me," he said. "I'll do it as long as I can."

— Wofford: Chautauqua County's all-time leading scorer, the former basketball star at Jamestown High School and Iona College was joined at the podium by his children, Alexis and Sebastian.

"They are what keeps me going every single day," Wofford said.

As for his CSHOF induction, he was nearly speechless.

"I truly can't believe I'm here," he said. "It's by the grace of God."

With that, Wofford left the podium and the Rev. Steven Taylor, pastor of the Panama United Methodist Church, gave the benediction.