

Jamestown, Salamanca Coaching Legend Sanfilippo Remembered

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By Scott Kindberg, Post-Journal

The photograph of the Jamestown High School football team and the roster on the facing page occupy the exact middle of the 1979 media guide. Housed in a drawer at the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame on West Third Street in Jamestown, the booklet is a wonderful trip down memory lane.

In the first row of the photo, from the left, I can identify from memory Paul Nelson, Dave Munella, Dave Currie, Vince Davis, Sam Restivo, Randy Ordines, Phil Scott and Bob Boutelle.

I can also name the players - with a minimal amount of roster "help" - in the back row - John Papaserge, Scott Rickerson, Mike Seastedt, Phil Johnson, Don Apperson and Bill Tucker.

The coaches?

Well that is easy, too.

Assistants Wally Huckno and Tom Phillips bookend the back row.

And the man squarely in the middle of that row?

None other than head coach Joe Sanfilippo.

Of course, he needs no introduction anyway.

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Sanfilippo, who died Sunday in Syracuse at 91, will be remembered as one of the most successful high school football coaches our area has ever known.

In Gallup, New Mexico, the Jamestown native guided Cathedral High School to state championships in 1954 and 1956 and a runner-up finish in 1955. In 17 seasons at Salamanca, he posted a 95-33-4 mark, including a 30-1-1 run from 1964-67, and finished his career with a 48-22-2 record in eight seasons at JHS.

For those who followed high school football from the early 1950s through the early 1980s, not many coaches were bigger than Sanfilippo.

Anywhere.

For example, in 1973 at the 26th annual National Football Clinic in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Sanfilippo was part of the faculty that included some of the best coaches in the collegiate ranks, including Johnny Majors, Don Coryell, Lee Corso, Tom Osborne and Monte Kiffin.

Attending the clinic with Sanfilippo was Bill Race, who had just completed his 11th year as the Falconer Central School coach.

"He was well known, even among the major colleges," Race said Wednesday night. "It wasn't just the Xs and Os. It was the way he taught (the game) and the way he prepared when you played against him. He, and his coaching staff, knew your program better than you did."

In the 13 seasons that Race squared off against Salamanca, the Golden Falcons won only twice.

"I have a memory of every single game," Race said. "One of the best memories is a lesson I'll never forget. We were beating Salamanca, 6-0, with probably eight minutes left in the fourth quarter. We had a fourth-and-4 on our own 46-yard line and I decided to go for it."

The Golden Falcons failed to convert.

After that, Chuck Crist, Sanfilippo's greatest player who went on to play in the NFL, took over, scoring two touchdowns in the final minutes, giving the Warriors the victory.

When Race met Sanfilippo at midfield after the game, the latter offered one piece of advice.

"Field position, Billy, field position."

Added Race: "In other words, he told me I should have punted."

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Wally Huckno took over as the Red Raiders' head coach in 1983 after Sanfilippo resigned following an 8-1 season and a Section VI championship in 1982.

"I think his legacy is he understood the three basic tenants of the game - the kicking game, defense and offense - in that order," said Huckno, who was an assistant from 1976 through 1982. "We always tried to be really sound. ... Defense was Joe's forte. When we practiced tackling, it wasn't for the faint of heart, by any means. If you were a runner on our team, you better expect to be tackled at practice. Sometimes it seemed like there weren't too many fellas on game days that were feeling 100 percent.

"Lackawanna stopped scrimmaging us, because every time they came down to scrimmage, they ended up losing a player."

Sanfilippo didn't do much losing during his tenure on the sidelines. In 29 seasons, he compiled a 171-57-6 record. During one stretch - from 1964-1967 - his first string defensive units at Salamanca allowed only six touchdowns.

"I think the thing I recognize the most about Coach Sanfilippo," said current JHS coach Tom Langworthy, "is he's the one that really instilled the level of toughness in the program and he's the one that set the bar high. Since he set it high, the players responded to that and rose the level of expectations. Coach Huckno continued to keep the bar high and, looking at that today, we still have the highest of expectations of our players and our program."

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Not surprisingly, Sanfilippo put out some outstanding talent through the years. At Salamanca, there were, among many others, Crist, followed by Sanfilippo's son, Carl, who was an all-state and prep All-American in 1971. At Jamestown, Sanfilippo coached Restivo, who went on to play at Florida State; the Davis brothers, Nate and Vince, who played at Michigan and Cornell; and Ordines, who went on to play at Hobart.

"We were very fortunate we had some really great football players," Huckno said.

And a pretty fair coach, who was respected far and wide by his peers.

"He not only taught me the game of football," Race said, "but also about understanding football, and how to be a winner and a better person. ... He knew how to get the best out of his kids."

Huckno said what he learned most from Sanfilippo was the importance of preparation.

"I remember him telling me that if you take care of the small things every time, the big things will take care of themselves," Huckno said.

On Saturday, one of the most prominent coaches in the history of Southern Tier high school football will be laid to rest.

"I have great memories of him," Race said.