

'Gamp' is in it for long haul

Pellegrini remains energetic after nearly 30 years as coach

by Ted Silary

Daily News Sports Writer

The drive to organize is never far from the surface for Malvern Prep football coach Gaspare "Gamp" Pellegrini.

One recent Saturday, he and three of his assistants strolled into a coffee shop near the school for a pregame meal.

The place was busy and short on help and no one was available to seat those waiting in line.

"I kept looking at my watch," Pellegrini said. "We had to eat and get back, so . . ."

The coach became a maitre d'. Party of two? Right this way. Three? Sit over here.

"That left the four of us," he said, smiling. "We eased right into a table. Made it back in plenty of time."

Assistant Joe Sells said he was hiding his face with his arm in the time-honored, I-don't-know-what-guy-gesture when Pellegrini started seating the customers.

"But that's Gamp," he said. "I couldn't help myself." Pellegrini said. "When I see that something has to be done, I do it."

"It's been like that since the early 1950s, when a sequence of events led to Pellegrini becoming the player-manager of his grammar school baseball team.

"I moved five guys around," said Pellegrini, who kept himself at catcher. "We came in second in the state. I took the lineup out to the umpire. Got the ground rules. I was Leo Durocher and Stan Lopata."

Pellegrini, 57, is in his 18th season at Malvern. Before that he coached for three seasons (1967-69) at long-defunct St. Thomas More, in West Philadelphia, his alma mater, and for eight at St. Joseph's Prep (1970-77).

With the Friars, No. 1 in the Daily News City Top 10, off to a 3-4 start, Pellegrini (172-110-8) ranks No. 3 all-time in city-league victories and can tie St. John Neumann's Paul Bartolomeo (173-122-12 from 1946-78) for second by winning Saturday at Loyola Prep, in Baltimore. Frankford's Al Angelo (184-98-5 from 1965-84 and '87) is the next target.

"When you put my record next to Al Angelo's, I'm embarrassed," Pellegrini said. "I look at the L's."

He laughed. "I would counter with this: 'Al, you should have coached at St. Tommy.'"

Off the field, Pellegrini is fun to be around. He can tell stories and drop one-liners with equal aplomb, which is probably one reason he has become a reasonably wealthy man while rising to the presidency of Snyder Moore Agencies, Inc., an insurance company in Exton.

On the field, he's mostly fun to be around.

"The one thing I haven't done through all these years is mellow," he said. "I've gone the other way, kind of. We could be winning 49-0, but if a guy misses an assignment, I'm going to yell. My assistants will be going, 'Yo, Gamp, look at the score. I can't help it. I'm a perfectionist.'"

"The danger is being too intense. You have to temper things. But I can't be one of those guys that goes," he switched to a voice soft and stretched out the words — "OK, boys, just go out and do your best."

Pellegrini's unofficial football coaching start occurred in the summer of '59 before he returned to the University of Delaware to serve as the starting quarterback on an 8-1 team.

Bart asked me to show Neumann's kids the wing-T," he said. "I was into it, running all over. The assistants were probably ready to strangle me. Bart was going, 'Leave him go. Leave him go.'"

"I loved that taste of teaching football. I still get that kick. When you make a plan and see it work, there's nothing like it. . . . We won't talk about the plenty of times it doesn't work."

Pellegrini spent three years in the Marines after graduating from Delaware. He did not coach in '63, then joined Pat Martin's staff at Tommy More in '64.

"Pat was in the insurance business, too," Pellegrini said. "He asked me one day to help him out and now I'm in my 32nd season of coaching. . . . Feels like the first."

Pellegrini went 8-20 at Tommy More when the school, never a football powerhouse, was dying a slow death because of shrinking enrollment (it closed in June '73). He went 50-38 at The Prep, capping his stay by winning the Catholic League championship and City Title in '77.

He switched to Malvern, where he has won 10 Inter-Ac League titles (nine outright, one shared), because he was moving from Broomall to West Chester, which was even farther away from North Philly.

Pellegrini and his wife, the former Mary Hennesly, have been married for 29 years. They have three children, Paul, 26, Kevin, 24 next week and a Friars assistant, and Tara, 21.

Kevin was a three-sport captain at Malvern and played football at Georgetown. With Kevin slated to become a starting safety in '93, Gamp gave serious thought to quitting or taking a sabbatical.

"One reason I stayed with it," he said, "was that athletic director Frank Ryan worked hard to



"The one thing I haven't done through all these years is mellow. I've gone the other way, kind of."

Gaspare Pellegrini, Malvern Prep coach

schedule nine of our games on Fridays so I could watch Kevin on Saturdays.

"I missed one game. Boy, did I agonize over that. Before I made my decision, I sent a letter to the parents and asked them to vote on whether they would have a problem with me missing the game. The response was all positive.

"I had a great time watching Kevin play, though they lost to Iona. Us? We beat Hill School. I was surprised they let me come back and coach."

Aside from talent, Pellegrini has been blessed with a godsend of a staff. Sells and Jim Panetta have been with him for more than 20 years. Nick Crono, the ex-West Catholic coach, is a 10-year veteran.

"I've seen what can happen when the assistants back-stab the head guy," Pellegrini said. "When I see that at other places, it sickens me. These guys are fun to be around and fiercely loyal."

Thanks to two-way stars such as Toby Booker, Derrick Downs, Joe Nangle, Doug Bergerson, Dave O'Brien, Steve Galczanski, John Heavens and Marlon Miller, Pellegrini has a shot to match the 10-0 record he had in '80.

Rather than soft-pedal its chances before the season, he said of his team, "It could be as good as we've had."

"I've always been one not to pop off," he said. "Crying poor-mouth with this group would have been like hitting the jackpot then saying I was poor."

"It would have been wrong for me not to draw attention to our kids. They deserve it. But when you do that, you put some pressure on yourself to have the great season. You have to make sure you do the job as a coach."

"That's never been a problem. ■"

1995 Gamp article

Clipped By:



Rcarey5171
Fri, Jan 29, 2021