

Malvern honors Gamp's '31 years of leadership and involvement'

- By John DiCandilo

- Apr 1, 2009

(Editors note: Sports writer John DiCandilo had the privilege of covering Malvern football during the entire successful reign of coach "Gamp" Pellegrini, who was honored Sunday at a special tribute at the school.) Do not mourn over what is no longer, but rejoice over what was.

This day was inevitable. Late January, the announcement came that many were not prepared for nor wanted to hear: Gamp Pellegrini was stepping down as head football coach at Malvern Prep.

Football had been successful long before Pellegrini arrived at Malvern in 1978, and probably will be for years to come as his son, Kevin, is ready and eager to prove his mettle as the new head coach against an always-difficult schedule.

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Gamp was always more than a football coach. He was a roving ambassador for Malvern Prep. He never did anything that would embarrass himself or the school that he so eloquently represented. Malvern and its core values meant and mean too much to him. You never heard an opposing coach speak derogatorily about him. And, believe me, after almost 40 years of being a purveyor of news about high school football, I can count on one hand and have digits left over about coaches who have earned similar praise.

Malvern football has been a Chester County standard bearer, a paradigm to be the blueprint for building your own program. Many have marveled at and envied its sustained excellence. Many have expressed the desire to emulate the class and dignity associated with Malvern, and not only the results on the 100-yard pitch.

The architect of this, of course, is that little man with the gravelly voice who enjoys a round of golf like nobody's business and, ahem, an "afternoon tea" to quench his thirst. Usually the first thing out of Gamp's mouth after a game, win or lose, was a reminder to his players to act respectfully toward that day's opponent, no matter how tense, intense or high spirited the game might have been. Unfortunately, there are some in the coaching profession who skipped the class or didn't take notes on post-game decorum.

The numbers are downright gaudy: 278-144-9 (career); 9-20 at the now-defunct St. Thomas Moore; 50-38-1 at St. Joseph's Prep, including a city championship; and 219-86-8 at Malvern, with 20 Inter-Ac titles and four undefeated seasons. To view Gamp strictly on a numerical basis is an effrontery to the man and all he stands for.

Sunday, the extended Malvern community paid homage. All five athletic directors who worked with him were in attendance. Opposing coaches, both current and past, came to honor him. Former and current players shared moments with him. More than 200 people shared this special day with him. The Inter-Ac League bestowed its "Person of the Year" award upon him.

He even caught his own "last pass" from his most recent quarterback and the master of ceremonies, Billy Connors. Finally, this unique tradition was turned upon the man who made it well known in these parts.

"This was like my daughter's wedding and that was a terrific day," said Gamp. "This is the only other day that I can remember that went so fast. It's like you looked around and you were watching the band leave. When you're the center of attention, you can't talk to anyone for more than 30 seconds. You want to talk to everyone, but sometimes there's

someone who's a surprise guest and you wish you could spend more time with everyone."

There was only one missing element that would have made this an exquisitely perfect day: Father David Duffy. Gamp and Father Duffy shared an extraordinarily close relationship. When Father Duffy died more than two years ago, a little piece of Gamp left this earth. To this day, he feels the void in his life that was Duffy.

"This began with a handshake with Father Duffy 31 years ago, and to have this end in the building that bears his name was something special. Father Duffy was such a good friend of mine. We both love people. We're people guys. He was always around the football team. He loved football, and he'd be out at practice two or three times a week. We both loved golf. We both loved our 'afternoon tea.' When Father Duffy died, I lost a wonderful connection with Malvern Prep. I always felt we would retire together. I joked with him because I always wondered what he would say at my funeral."

His long-time assistant coaches, Joe Sells, Jim Pannetta and Nick Cirone, knew the string of competition and fun was nearing its end. They might have even put an occasional bug in Gamp's ear about retirement. But, if Gamp had decided to return for another season, they would have been on the sidelines with him. Not many coaches inspire that kind of loyalty.

It's difficult at times to not inject a first-person tone into a story, especially since reporters are supposed to remain "objective," even when the subject matter is of a personal nature. Our opinions are to be our "internal damnation," and be filtered out of the stories we file. But, ever since that first season in 1978, the relationship Gamp and I have had transcends that of coach-reporter. His friendship means more to me than he'll ever know. I can't thank him enough for all of the time and help he has given me over the years, after both wins and losses. He never balked at post-game interviews. He always made himself available.

He always stayed until the last question was asked. He always gave you a straight answer no matter how difficult the question might be. He always made me feel as if I were a part of the "Malvern family."

"You know, one night I was driving to meet my wife, Mary, for dinner," said Gamp, "and I drove by Malvern Prep. The lights were on, and, as always, it was so beautiful with the grounds, the statues, and everything. Then, it suddenly dawned on me that I was no longer the head football coach. I have to admit, it was a little hard thinking that."

As it is for so many of us, Gamp.