

Coaching legend Pellegrini calls it a career

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GASPARE "GAMP" PELLEGRINI and what he calls his penchant for "taking over" go way back.

Even beforehand, no doubt, but definitely to a story he tells from 1952.

Pellegrini that spring was an eighth-grade catcher for the CYO baseball team at St. Callistus School, in Overbrook, and one day at practice, he decided to speak up, in spades, when the fill-in coach, whom Pellegrini suspected really would have preferred being the head coach, time permitting, asked him why he looked upset.

"I said the first baseman should be playing centerfield, the rightfielder should be at first, the second baseman should be at third . . ." Pellegrini said. "He dropped his bat, and quit, and he wouldn't let the regular guy — he was that guy's boss in the fire department — coach us anymore, either."

"The season was about to start. So, I went to the rectory and talked to the priest. He said he'd take care of it. He did. Made me the player-manager. I never had any problems. The guys listened to me. Did what I told them. We made it all the way to the state final."

Pellegrini's team lost in the state final, 5-2.

"It wasn't my fault, I think I went 6-for-6," he said. "I might have struck out four times. Can't remember."

That story and others poured out of Pellegrini this week as he prepared for a moment that finally came yesterday.

After 45 consecutive seasons of coaching high school football, three as an assistant then 42 as the boss, he told administrators at Malvern Prep he was retiring.

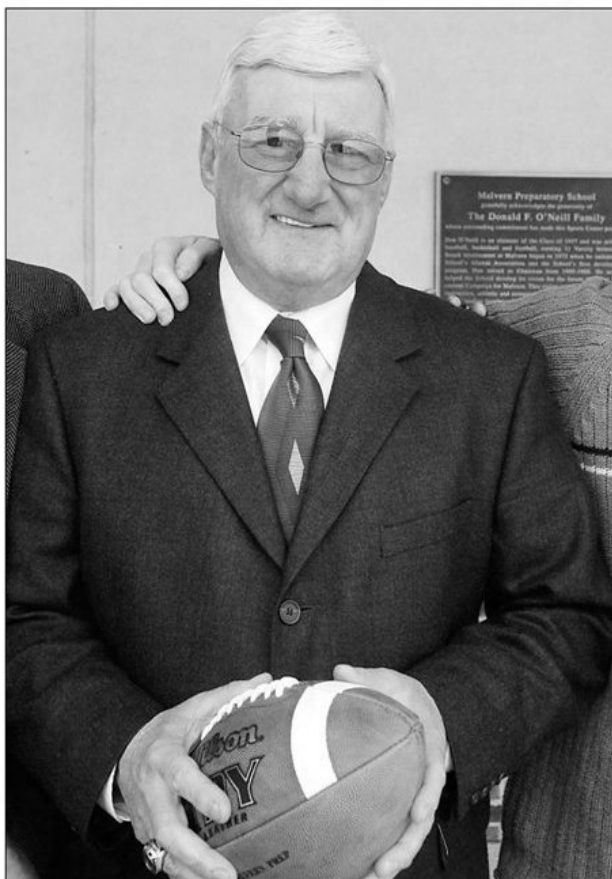
"It's just time," he said. "I'll be 71 in April. More and more, I was going against guys who weren't even born when I became a head coach. It kinda hits you."

Pellegrini leaves with an overall record of 278-144-9, counting three seasons at long-gone St. Thomas More (1967-69), eight at St. Joseph's Prep (1970-77) and 31 at Malvern (1978-2008). His records at each stop were 9-20, 50-38-1 and 219-86-8.

He captured the Catholic League and City Titles in his final season at St. Joe's, and then orchestrated unprecedented dominance at Malvern, where his teams claimed 16 outright Inter-Ac League championships and shared four others.

His 278 wins, 21 titles and 42 seasons are city-leagues records. The No. 2 efforts in those categories are 217, 13 and 35, respectively.

Pellegrini's final team, which went 10-0



File photo

Gaspare 'Gamp' Pellegrini's 278 wins, 21 titles, 42 seasons are city-leagues records.

and earned his personal best-ever designation, was honored at a banquet last Sunday.

"A lot of people were anticipating the [retirement] announcement there," he said. "I wanted to keep it about the team because, boy, they were just so great. I thanked a lot of people, though, and got a little choked up. Couldn't finish my remarks."

Pellegrini grew up at 6625 Haddington Avenue and his house was one of six on

that block occupied by relatives. At Tommy More, a small-enrollment school at 47th and Wyalusing (it closed in 1975), he was an All-Catholic quarterback and then played for Delaware.

Here comes a story . . .

"We're losing to Rutgers, 14-7, very early in the third quarter and the ball's on our 20, fourth and 6 inches," he said. "I look over to the sideline and our coach, Dave Nelson, doesn't give me the kick sign. He puts his arms to his side, like, 'I don't

know,' turns his back and walks down the sideline. Well, I decide to go for it."

He laughed. "We needed 6 inches. I got 8."

Delaware went on to win, 32-14.

"I've always been that way," he said. "I've always stepped up . . . And people haven't punched me out for it."

In 1959, before his final Delaware season, Pellegrini was asked by Paul Bartolomeo, the legendary coach at then-Bishop Neumann, to help him install Delaware's Wing-T over a 2-week period, one at South Philly's League Island Park and another at a camp in New Jersey.

"Well, I'm not only doing the backs, but I'm telling the linemen how to block, too," Pellegrini said, laughing. "The line coach is looking and Bart just goes, 'Let him go . . . Let him go.' I kinda took over the whole practice."

"At the end of the 2 weeks, the school gave me \$100. And the 13 backs, each one gave me a dollar. Big money back then."

Joe Sells, his righthand man for 35 seasons (Jim Panetta was also with him "forever"), said Pellegrini was so successful because he treated the kids like men.

"He had the knack," Sells said. "When to be serious. When to joke around. He always knew how to walk that fine line, and how to make sure the kids knew where he stood. Gamp's a special man."

Though Pellegrini always ran the show, he was hardly a tyrant.

"He was always open to anything I wanted to do," said Sells, whose area of interest was offense. "As long as he thought it was sound, he'd give the OK."

Said Pellegrini: "I was always surrounded by guys who knew what they were doing. I can't thank them enough."

Pellegrini used his leadership skills away from football fields, too — witness that he owns an insurance company, Snyder Moore, in Exton — and he always appreciated the strong relationships he enjoyed with Malvern's athletic and overall administrations.

So, why is he leaving?

"I guess I could have stayed around and been a figurehead," he said. "That's not me. I just can't stand there and watch."

"I put a lot of pressure on myself to win. That causes stress. I always expected big things, not only for myself but for everybody else. If we lose it's, 'What happened to Malvern?' If we win by a few points it's, 'That's all they won by?'"

"I got a lot of satisfaction from coaching. I was doing something I loved and we enjoyed success most of the time."

"No matter what I'd step in, it'd turn out to be roses." ★