

# Pellegrini reflects on Malvern career

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"Gamp Pellegrini is that life treasure you rarely come across. Virtually everyone feels better for just becoming an acquaintance. The day (his retirement) becomes a reality, the local football scene will lose a giant of a man who has touched thousands of hearts through his kindness, his paternal instinct and his sense of humor. "So wrote long-time Main Line sportswriter John DiCandilo a few years back. It seems there was always a "Gamp watch", the day the legend would call it a day. That day has come and a glorious era in Main Line scholastic football has indeed ended. Best of all, a great coach goes out in fitting style with one of his best team's ever.

Gaspare "Gamp" Pellegrini, 71, the head coach at Malvern Prep for three decades, decided to call it quits last week. His Friar teams claimed 16 outright Inter-Ac League championships - seven more than anyone else - and shared four others.

The numbers are staggering. After 42 years, his overall record was 278-144-9. His mark in 31 years at Malvern was 219-86-8. Before coming to Malvern, Pellegrini was head coach at Catholic League schools' St. Joseph's Prep (1970-77) and St. Thomas More (1967-69). He fittingly captured the Catholic League and City Titles in his final season at St. Joe's before taking over at Malvern.

Pellegrini informed the administration at the school last Thursday that he would be stepping aside. His powerful team this season posted a 10-0 mark and another Inter-Ac crown.

"I just decided it was time to move on and get some young blood in there," Pellegrini said. "I told the kids of my decision on Thursday, and I told them that for the last 45 years I have been at camp on Labor Day. I haven't been down the sea shore or anywhere else, so it is going to take some getting used to. For 45 consecutive years I have been at some type of football camp.

"I just felt it was time to go. The school is thriving right now both athletically and educationally. The kids are great and the whole experience has been wonderful."

Malvern, under Pellegrini, was known for his long-time assistants, Nick Cerone, Joe Sells and Jimmy Panetta and the loyalty of that staff. The head coach also coached with his two sons, Kevin 37, the head junior varsity coach, and Paul, 40. Pellegrini said Kevin would apply for the head varsity position.

"We have a lot of love for each other and the kids see that and they know it is a team effort," Pellegrini said. "They know we are all in this thing together. I had a great bunch of kids this past season and a wonderful football team.

"Kevin is going to apply for the job and the last thing he told me before I went into Thursday's meeting was that he did not want me to say I wanted him to be the head coach. He wants to go through the process like everyone else.

"I would hope the school does the right thing. They have seen what Kevin has done for the last 10 or 15 years. That way most of the older guys would come back. But the last thing I wanted to do was to put the school in the corner. Malvern has been very good to me and they will make the right choice. But it is time to get some fresh blood in there."

Pellegrini's last game as a head coach was one of his best. At jam-packed Villanova Stadium on Thanksgiving Day, the Friars were looking to avenge a 33-6 loss to Catholic League powerhouse St. Joseph's Prep the season before. Since the Inter-Ac was not going to be involved in the PIAA playoffs once again, this was the Friars' Super Bowl.

War of nerves

"After 400 football games as a head coach, you'd think I go to a game relatively calm, but it's worse than ever," Pellegrini said. "I can't eat, I can't sleep. I think about how I could be watching a game at home, instead of freezing while scouting Episcopal Academy. It's the kids. It's the

good feeling of being coach at Malvern. It's a prime position. It's a No. 1 school and a No. 1 job. Plus, it's the coaches. Several of us have been together more than 30 years."

Throughout his coaching career, Pellegrini has carried on a tradition called "the Last Pass." Each senior, as he completes his final practice, goes out for a pass thrown by the coach. When he brings the ball back, Pellegrini greets him with a hug and a word of thanks for his contribution to the program.

There may not be enough time for the hugs and thanks to go around to the thrower this time.

- Peter DiGiovanni and John DiCandilo contributed to this article.