

Coach Pass Years is a night to behold



Photo by Courtesy photo

The Waltham High wrestling program celebrated the "Coach Pass Years" Saturday in honor of founding coach John Passarini.

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Waltham -

No one held back their feelings for their old coach, John Passarini, at the special function with his Waltham wrestling family Saturday night at the Sons of Italy Hall.

Fred Smerlas, a senior captain on the 1975 Hawks team, said that lessons Coach Pass taught him in his high school years were among the most inspirational to him throughout his 14-year professional football career.

``What I remember most was how he taught me how to be self-reliant and how to be a man," said Smerlas, moments before giving Passarini a hug. ``I was great because I touched greatness, and that greatness was John Passarini."

Smerlas was one of more than 100 former wrestlers Passarini coached at Waltham High from 1970 to 1983 who expressed their affection for Coach Pass and Waltham wrestling over the course of Saturday's event.

“He started the program on enthusiasm,” said Robert Cappadona, one of the 19 members of the original team Coach Pass formed in the winter of 1970-71. “Nobody knew about wrestling, except professional wrestling on TV, if you'd admit you watched it. What he did was make it fun.”

That enthusiasm was reciprocated by Passarini. Moments after John Mallin (Class of 1974) took the microphone, and said how much he wanted to be around Coach Pass “because we want to be around positive people.” Passarini approached him, calling “Johnny Mallin,” and put his arm around Mallin's shoulder, smiling, joking, just like old times.

“Coach Pass cared. He cared about you,” added Chris Keene, Cappadona's teammate on the 1970-71 team, who, with his friend John Mangini, was among the first to respond to Passarini's original announcement about the wrestling team signup over the high school loudspeaker.

“It makes perfect sense that after he retired as coach in 1983, that he went on to work with handicapped kids,” Keene continued. “He was all about giving people the chance to be their best.”

Many of Passarini's former wrestlers have become coaches themselves, working in local youth programs, as well as at the high school and college and adult levels. Nick Mirabile (Class of 1973), among the first of Passarini's wrestlers to coach, compared Passarini to Johnny Appleseed and especially King Arthur, “with a passion for truth, self-reliance, determination. Like the Knights of the Roundtable, we learned from Coach Pass and spread his wisdom.”

Phil Riccio (Class of 1975) also learned much from Passarini. Riccio succeeded Passarini as Waltham head coach in 1984, a team that has also generated several more high school coaches, including Kevin Russo, Eric Alexson and Paul Morreale, who have built a solid Watertown High program in recent years.

“It's much more than him being a coach - coaching is above the surface, rides above the surface,” said Riccio, who lives in Pennsylvania and remains involved in the sport. “There was camaraderie, discipline, and because of what he did with the program, it deeply impacted people. Certainly me. He was a steadying influence in my life and for a lot of these guys.”

Morreale agreed. “When you wrestle for Coach Pass, you take on a formula for success in wrestling and in life,” said Morreale, who entered Passarini's youth program in the 1970s as a second grader, and matured to greatness, taking second in the state and second at the New England championships as a Waltham High senior in 1986.

“Coach Pass had a great influence and his focus on health and wellness was ahead of his time,” said Brian Schoener (1983), who was encouraged by former Waltham High coach Carl Cincotta Jr. to coach in the local youth program, which is focused on providing positive leadership lessons and opportunities for good health and exercise.

Comments expressed by his former wrestlers were heartfelt. “Coach has brought together a lot of people, formed a great family,” said Arthur D’Agostino (Class of 1974), whose classmates Joe Chaisson and Keith Solomon wrote similar sentiments on a special memento collage created for Passarini at the event.

Bobby Locke (Class of 1982) expressed his sentiments through another medium - film. Locke presented his documentary, “Journey Through Freestyle Wrestling,” which cut from action shots of female high school wrestlers competing today with shots of Locke from 1982, along with a narrative of Locke’s thoughts about what wrestling means to young people.

Passarini was greatly touched by the film and seeing the parents of his former athletes in attendance. Passarini acknowledged that Morreale’s mother, Isabelle Morreale, and Nick Mirabile’s mother, Mary Mirabile, were among his best assistant coaches.

Passarini was also deeply moved to see Shirley Pidgeon, whose three sons Rick, David and Tim were captains for Passarini, starting with Rick, who joined the Hawks as a sophomore in 1973. Passarini said that every year for the past 34 years, Shirley Pidgeon has baked him her special applesauce cake and delivered it to his home at Christmastime.

She explained why. “I was so grateful to him for getting my son on the right road, so grateful that I still give him an applesauce cake. We love him for the wonderful person he is. He did more for my sons and the Waltham community than any words can say.” Elaine Schoener and daughter Laini (Schoener) Aucoin had fond memories of watching the three Schoeners wrestle for Coach Pass and the feeling was mutual.

“One of my happiest memories was seeing Mr. Schoener run onto the mat after Billy won (a big match) and lift him up into the air,” Passarini said. “I was so touched by that. And, I was so glad the referee didn’t assess a penalty point for him going onto the mat.”

Those outpourings of good feeling were part of the Coach Pass Years, as Ciro Zottola, a sectional champ from Passarini’s final team in 1983, said.

“The emotions, the memories, are hard to put into words. I was close to him - I knew his (late) mother and father, and spoke to them in Italian. This idea of family is real. Coach is a loving person, caring when he speaks to you, and it becomes reciprocal.”