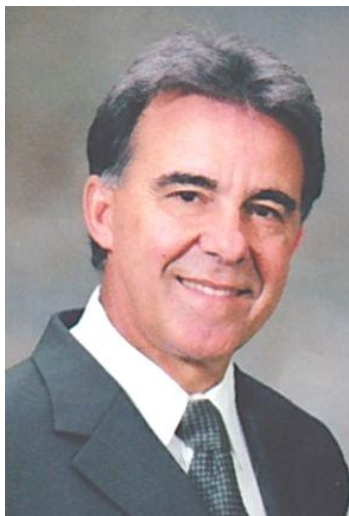


2013 Saugerties Sports Hall of Fame



Tony Elia

It is August 1972 and approximately 15 young men, including myself, John Speirs, anxiously gather on the soccer field at Saugerties High School, which has decided to add boys Varsity soccer to its athletic program. These young men, mostly freshman and sophomores would make up that team. The group all knew each other because it was Saugerties and back then, everybody knew each other. What we didn't know were two things. We didn't know our coach and we didn't know soccer. We also didn't know that these two things would become one and the same. Tony Elia was our coach and Tony Elia was soccer.

This group of athletes was trying the sport of soccer because they either didn't like football (which everybody played) or were trying to stay in shape for varsity basketball. For me, it was both. Anyone who knows me knows I'm not exactly football tough and to be honest, they didn't have a helmet to fit my head.

Some guys had played soccer in public school gym class and others, like me, having attended St. Mary's, had never touched a soccer ball, let alone kicked one. On the night before the first tryout, I looked up soccer in the encyclopedia, so not to be embarrassed on the first day. Little did I or everyone in that group of 15 know, we were about to meet the human encyclopedia of soccer, Coach Tony Elia.

Tony Elia was the greatest soccer player any of us would ever come in personal contact with. He molded and shaped us into soccer players, leading and instructing by example. He was the best at every skill. If you followed and tried to imitate him you were at the very least doing the skill correctly and improving all the time. He even taught us how to preserve our brand new team Adidas soccer cleats; by having us waterproof them with Vaseline and stuffing newspaper in them after games in the rain.

From that first summer of 1972 until today, friendships and relationships continue to thrive between Tony and his countless protégés. For me personally, throughout my 26-year coaching career at Saugerties High School, I used the Tony Elia instruction method of "partners", drills and individualized instruction, with the coach demonstrating by example, a desired skill. With

that being said, I am privileged and honored to share his story and congratulate Tony Elia on his well deserved induction into the Saugerties Sports Hall of Fame.



1950; Tony with mom Rosaria and dad Giovanni while still in Sicily.

On July 10, 1943, Giovanni Elia and his wife Rosaria anxiously watched the American flotilla approach the southern coast of Sicily for an imminent invasion. Fortunately, the parish priest hung a white sheet on the church steeple thereby avoiding a conflict and casualties in the small Sicilian village of Santa Croce Camerina. As war raged on throughout Europe, the young couple wondered what lie ahead as they awaited the birth of their first child

Rosaria gave birth to Antonino (Tony) on February 5, 1944 and added to her joy were signs that WWII would soon be over. During the next ten years, however, the Elia family would struggle with reconstruction, political upheaval and unemployment. However, with hard work and the assistance of the Marshal Plan (American economic aid to Europe) the Elia's were able to survive the after effects of war.

By the early 1950's, Tony's paternal grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins had emigrated from Sicily to the United States. Settling in Paterson, New Jersey they worked in the textile mills. Sponsored by his grandfather, 10 year old Tony and his Dad came to the U.S. in 1954, leaving mother Rosaria and three-year-old brother Roberto behind. Selling most of the family's belongings to pay for the boat trip and carrying two wooden suitcases, one containing personal clothing and the other Giovanni's joiner tools, they made their way across the Atlantic Ocean. The family was reunited when Rosaria and Roberto joined them in the U.S. in 1956.

As a cabinet maker and a seamstress Giovanni and Rosaria worked diligently to support their family. In 1960 they bought a three family house. Their daughter Joanne was born in 1962. Tony, Roberto and Joanne were encouraged to do well in school, help at home after school, and at age 14 expected to hold part-time jobs and help the family survive.

Tony went to Paterson Eastside High School, (made famous by the film and song "Lean On Me"). He held several part-time jobs and played interscholastic sports as both a member of the soccer team as well as kicker for the 1961 New Jersey State champion Paterson Eastside High School football team.

Tony's High School coach, Ronald J. Frederick, commented, "Tony is a living legend to soccer fans throughout the New Jersey area. He is a role model for what is good in sports and I congratulate him on his induction to the Hall of Fame".



Tony (front row second from right) with 1961 New Jersey "All-State" High School Soccer Team.

Tony also developed a love for soccer by playing year round. In the summer of 1961 and 1962, he was selected as a ball boy for the International Soccer League, held at the Polo Grounds in New York City. There he practiced with such notable teams as Everton, Monaco, Dundee United, Dukla Prague, Bangu and Besiktas. In the fall of the same years, he played in high school, where he was named first team All-State for New Jersey High School Soccer. His high school team reached the state

semifinals both years. Graduating in 1963, he went to work in a textile plant and on weekends played for the Paterson Roma Sports Club and the New Brunswick Hungarians of the American Soccer League.

In 1964, Tony was drafted by the U.S. Army at the beginning of the Vietnam Conflict. After basic and advanced training, he had the good fortune of being recruited for the U.S. Armed Forces Soccer Team, the Council International Sports Militaire (i.e. Military Olympics). Based in Stuttgart, Germany, the team competed internationally against Austria, France, Holland, Luxemburg, Germany and Spain.

One of Tony's teammates from CISM and a former U.S. World Cup team member, Avner Wolanow, reflected "While playing with Tony against top European select teams, Tony was a great, unselfish player and a gentleman on and off the field. I applaud Tony".

Another purpose of this team was to promote German-American relations. The team competed against Bundesliga and Regional Liga (1st and 2nd division teams); Berlin, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Munich, etc. The team was coached by Billy Elliot, formerly of Sunderland and the English National Team.



1966; Tony (kicking ball) playing with U.S. Armed Forces Team in Europe vs. Germany.

Honorably discharged in 1967, Tony decided to use his skills and further his education. Receiving a full soccer scholarship from Mitchell Junior College in New London, Connecticut and utilizing the G.I. Bill, he acquired his Associates degree. While there, he was named 1st team National Junior College All-American.

Tony's coach at Mitchell, Warren Swanson, commented, "Tony Elia was the greatest American soccer player I ever saw, as well as a gentleman, super person, and terrific coach. He always helped his fellow players in practice and games providing great inspirational leadership".

Tony continued his education at Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York, where he also received a full athletic scholarship. There he was named 1st team N.C.A.A. All-American. In 1969 and 1970, Hartwick College reached the N.C.A.A. quarter-finals and semi-finals, respectively, losing to Harvard 1-0 in overtime and to eventual U.S. champion St. Louis 1-0.

After receiving his Bachelors degree in History, Tony went to SUNY New Paltz for his teaching certification in Social Studies, and a Masters degree in Education. While studying at New Paltz, he played soccer for the Elizabeth Sports Club of Elizabeth, New Jersey. In 1972, they were U.S. Open Cup Champions.

At this point in Tony's career he was faced with deciding between professional soccer and professional educator. The pro soccer choice involved Al Miller, Tony's Hartwick College coach and former U.S. World Cup Team coach, who now coached the Philadelphia Atoms of the North American Professional Soccer League. He offered Tony a one-year contract.



1969; Tony playing for Hartwick vs. Harvard in NCAA quarter final.

Coach Miller commented, “Tony was a highly skilled player scoring memorable goals, including one against Harvard, helping us advance to the NCAA Final Four. He was also a quiet, confident, good student with great character”.

The second choice was a teaching career. There was a Social Studies position at Saugerties High School where, coincidentally, they were looking to start an interscholastic soccer program. Since the future of professional soccer at that time was uncertain, Tony chose a teaching career along with the opportunity to coach a soccer program within a high school (and community) that up to now couldn't tell the difference between a soccer ball and a volleyball. His decision proved a wise one (and fortuitous for Saugerties), since the Philadelphia Atoms who were the 1973 National Champions, shortly thereafter went bankrupt, subsequently landing Tony in Saugerties and resulting in the introduction of the world's most popular sport to a high school that was ready and willing.

From 1972 to 2009, Tony would devote his energies to Saugerties High students and make Saugerties his home. For ten years he taught 10th grade Social Studies and for twenty-six years 7th grade Social Studies. (Incidentally, I was a student in Tony's first European History class.) He started the interscholastic boys soccer program and coached the varsity team for 30 years. Mostly in the shadows of state powerhouses John Jay, Arlington and Highland, SHS was always competitive and made the sectionals practically every year. They won the Mid-Hudson Athletic League Championship in 1995 and 2002, and were in the Section IX finals several times. Since his arrival to Saugerties, Coach Elia has been instrumental in the development of soccer in the area. He was co-founder and chairman of both the Mid-Hudson

Youth and Adult Leagues; as well as the Saugerties Youth Soccer League (later AYSO); and the Saugerties Adult Soccer League.



Coach Elia, top row far right, with 1972 SHS boys soccer team. (Fellow Saugerties Sports Hall of Famer John Speirs, top row far left)

Many of Tony's players went on to play Division I and II soccer in college, notably, John Speirs (SUNY New Paltz), Robert Benzenhofer (UCCC, U.S. National Junior College Champion) and Akron University, Rick Conley (SUNY Geneseo, U.S. Top 20), Tim Zulick, (Roanoke College, VA), Brian Hildebrandt (Fairfield University, CT), Sean Quinlan, (MHAL player of the year, Hudson Valley CC).

Sean Quinlan expressed “Tony taught me the importance of ball control and focus, he was not just my coach but my mentor of this beautiful game. He strived on concentrating on tactics and doing the simple things with the ball. There are only two men in Saugerties who have the knowledge and skills to teach this amazing game and they are Tony Elia and Oscar Benzenhofer. Congratulations Tony and thank you for everything”.

Robert Benzenhofer shared, “Tony was my teacher, my coach and my friend. Since age 12, he has helped me and many others elevate not only our level of play but also the appreciation of the game. To master the game you must slave the trade... practice... practice... practice. And one could only hope to apprentice under the wing of a master. In the field of soccer, Tony is a master.

Most of Tony Elia's players have made soccer a life sport by playing in various leagues, coaching at different levels, and passing the love of the sport on to their children. By doing so,

alumni of Coach Elia's program pass on the knowledge, tradition, and passion of the game he so dearly loves and in the fashion he intended and is very proud of.

Coach Elia's additional honors include: Outstanding College Athlete of America, Fulbright Scholar, Bergen Records' (N.J.) Soccer team of the 20th Century, U.S.S.F. class "A" Coaching license, Honorary Citizen of Gelnhausen, Germany for services rendered as player/coach of a championship team and promoting German-American relations.

Since retirement, Coach Elia continues to work with the Saugerties youth. He is a substitute teacher at Saugerties High School, conducts soccer clinics, and has made a comeback in the SHS soccer program currently coaching the boy's modified team.

Soccer mom, Anitra D'Errico, claims "Coach Elia, balances both the discipline and the encouragement that the modified age player needs, calling it the "Elia Affect". Her son, Matt, as well as others, joked that they were willing to fail 8th grade just to have him as coach for a second year".



Coach Elia (top row center) with his 2012 SHS Modified Soccer Team.



Tony and wife Amanda with, l-r; son-in-law Yoshiki Miyazawa and daughter Sarah, daughter in-law Lauren, grandson Owen and son Matt, and far right, son Tony John Elia.

Tony and his wife Amanda (Mandy) presently reside in the village of Saugerties. His mother Rosaria, brother Roberto and family, and his sister Joanne and family, all reside in New Jersey. Tony's son Anthony is a librarian at Columbia University and has two children Lilah and Solje. His other son, Matthew, is a surveyor for Constitution Pipeline living in Boston with his wife Lauren and son Owen. Tony's daughter Sarah teaches ESL (English as a Second Language) at SUNY New Paltz, and lives in New Paltz with her husband Yoshiki. Step-daughter Katie Wrolsen teaches Special Education in Hyde Park school district and lives in Saugerties.

Tony Elia is living proof of the American dream. He is grateful to the people of Saugerties, and all those who have helped in making that dream come true. In return, Tony has tried to do the same for his students and players, and hopes that they too will achieve their dream. In recognition of Tony Elia's remarkable accomplishments as an athlete as well as the impact that Tony has made on the community of Saugerties as a coach and mentor of scores of soccer athletes, it is with great pleasure and pride that the Saugerties Sports Hall of Fame members welcome Tony as a 2013 Inductee.



l-r; Step-Daughter Katie Wrolsen, granddaughters Solje and Lilah (daughters of Tony John Elia) and daughter Sarah Elia.