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IMMORTALIZED IN BLUE, GRAY AND BRONZE

Dozens of former players return home as Reynolds honors Amato By CALEB STRIGHT

PYMATUNING TOWNSHIP — As Frank Amato neared the end of his high school career at Sharon and it was time to look toward college, he knew his family couldn't afford it. His football coach — John Chickerno — knew it too, and made the push that got him a scholarship to Purdue University.

"He turned a lot of lives around and he went the extra mile for me,"

Amato said of his high school coach. "His example lead me to want to do the same thing for my players. It was payback time for me."

Friday night Amato was surrounded by dozens of men who say any debt he had has been more than paid.

During half-time of Reynolds High School's matchup with Hickory, the district honored one of its legends with a bronze plaque, commemorating his 157-56-4 record — a county record for wins at the time — and the impact he had on his players' lives.

Those players came from across the state and across the country to help honor him.

"He was everything a good coach should have been — a good teacher and a good mentor," said Chris Barker, who played under him in the 1992 season, Amato's last and record-setting campaign.

Amato has taken in players who have suffered personal tragedy, have made the push — like his coach did — to get his guys into higher education, and inspired 23 seasons of young men.

Over 30 games under Amato during the mid-1980s, Ron Park amassed 4,500 yards as a running back, a school record that stands today, but what he'll mention first is what Amato did for him when his family lost their home to a fire.

Amato not only took Park in, but he helped the family find a new house and mentored him.

"When I got him, he could have gone either way," Amato said of Park.

"He could have been a great football player and been a great success, or he could have been a complete failure. I had to help him."

Amato has watched with pride as Park earned his degree from Thiel College and gone onto a successful career at Sharon Regional Health System.

For Park, it all started on the gridiron.

He got his first start in his sophomore year after an injury to Dave Dickson. The Raiders had been running a double wing, but Amato saw something in Park. He switched up the formation to a Power I.

"He changed the backfield formation, just so I could see the field better," Park said. "Now that's a brilliant coach."

What followed was, in addition to his yardage record, 66 touchdowns.

For Park's teammate Heath Roscoe, Amato put in a good word that got him onto West Point's football team and shaped him into the kind of man that can survive the notorious first year at the United States Military Academy.

"If you don't have the mental toughness, you're not going to make it,"

Roscoe explained.

Currently in his 26th year of service to the U.S. Army, Col. Roscoe is currently serving Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., as chief of staff, and was so impressed by Amato that he traveled all the way from Missouri, back to Reynolds, just for Friday's presentation.

Like Roscoe, John Tofani, now the head teacher at Reynolds High School, recalled learning toughness from the coach, too.

"He always taught us that you might get smacked in the mouth, but it's how you react and how you come back that matters," he said.

He explained that it's a lesson that's stuck with him and other players as they face adversity in their adult lives.

"As a kid you didn't know that a lesson on the football field would translate," he said. "It's later in life you realize the football lessons are life lessons."

Amato said he knew the challenges would come.

"Once they leave me, they have the biggest battle of their life ahead of them," Amato acknowledged. "It starts with me. And if you're going to be in the habit of giving a 100 percent, it's going to pay off."

"He taught every one of us that it's 100 percent every play and nothing less," Park said. "Every time I got the ball, my goals was to get a touchdown."

"The thought never crossed our minds that when we stepped onto the football field that we were ever going to lose," Barker said.

Amato's teams were good, because they worked hard, his players said, something they learned from watching him.

"He put in so much time in the offseason," Barker added. "He put in way more time than he got paid for. He was in the weight room every night with us, and he expected the same out of his players."

Amato's program was likely the first in the county to do weight training, a practice that made his players bigger, faster and stronger, as well as less prone to injury.

To get those weights, he went to local manufacturer Chicago Bridge and Iron, which built them. In those early years, they were stored and used in a garage.

Amato — who also taught history at the high school — started coaching at Reynolds in 1962, but the legendary coach didn't take over the program until 1969.

He served first under Ralph Bouch, the district's first coach after forming years earlier, but saw two other coaches take over the reigns before they were handed to him.

"It all worked out in the end," Amato said.

Which is about how Barker sees things.

Barker was there in 1992 when the team carried Amato off the field on its shoulders for his record-setting win, and has been waiting for Amato to receive this honor.

"He deserved the whole thing," Barker said, not that Amato talked about records. "He wasn't concerned with personal accolades. It was his assistant coaches that let us know how important those wins were to his record. This recognition is long over due, and I can't wait to be at the field."

Amato, 79, can still be found on the sidelines today. He coaches linebackers for Thiel College.

When he runs into young coaches, here's his advice:

"What's the reason you want to be a coach? For some guys, it's an ego thing. That's not the right way. You're there to help the kids. These kids will need advice and an example set for them. That's why you're there."