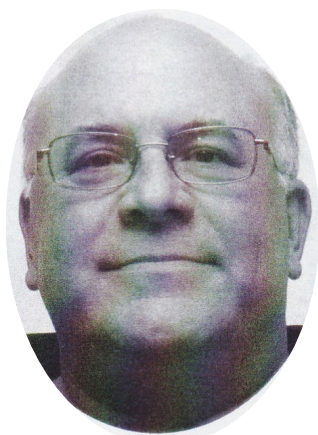


Fred Petrini



Fred Petrini has had a love affair with baseball and softball in Norwalk for more than four decades.

Which is why it should come as no surprise he has been recognized as one of the best local players in both sports.

A catcher his entire career, Petrini's long association with baseball began back when he played with Hilltop Garden in the International Little League and as a 12-year-old helped them win the championship.

He moved up to the Norwalk PONY League as a 13 and 14 year-old, playing with Harrick's Dairy and making the all-star team. He not only made the all-star team again when he moved up to the Colt League, but was the captain of the Norwalk squad that advanced all the way to the Eastern Regional final.

It was also right around this time Petrini made the varsity baseball team at Central Catholic High School, and as a senior was voted to the 1971 All-Western Connecticut Conference first team. That same year, he was also named to The Hour Newspaper's first-ever All-City Baseball Team.

After graduation, Petrini went on to play in the Norwalk City League for the Blues, a team Dave Powers put together made up of former CCHS Cavaliers.

Then when the City League broke up in the early 1970s, with no place for young adults to play baseball, Petrini switched to softball and embarked on another successful career. In fact, he helped start the first team he played on, the "Nobodies," who played in leagues in Norwalk and Wilton.

The team was eventually sponsored by Sportland and then the Laurels, which is where Petrini enjoyed his most success. The Laurels dominated the eighties, winning city championships in 1980, '82, '85 and '86, and then adding a fifth city crown in 1988 when several holdovers from the team formed Cotaling's Auto Body.

And the impressive thing about those five city titles was Petrini and his teammates beat the Aces, a perennial power, all five years en route to the championship.

It was also during this stretch, in a 1981 article in The Hour, that Petrini was selected as one of the "10 Best Softball Players" in the city of Norwalk according to a panel of local softball officials.

He also played in the Danbury Industrial League on Saturday nights with a team called Little Deli, which he helped lead to three undefeated seasons. In the late 1970s, when softball season was over, Petrini played in the Norwalk Recreation Adult Touch Football League for the Steamrollers.

A math teacher at West Rocks Middle School, Petrini also started the Norwalk Middle School Touch Football League, which he operated for 18 years. It was also during his tenure at West Rocks that Petrini's coaching career got its start. He coached the girls softball team there for four years, winning three city championships and losing only two games in four seasons.

He also coached girls basketball at West Rocks for one year and won another city title. He even filled in as coach of the field hockey team for one season, and spent another year coaching the boys soccer team, which lost every game.

"I didn't know what the hell I was doing," Petrini admits with a laugh.

But Petrini's success with girls softball at West Rocks did not go unnoticed. Many of the players he coached went on to play at Norwalk High School and help the Bears win four straight FCIAC championships from 1978-81, including an undefeated season and a state title in 1980.

When NHS head coach Ray Barry had an opening for an assistant coach in 1982, he asked Petrini to fill it. For the next 22 years, Barry and Petrini became one of the best coaching tandems in the state as they led the Lady Bears to seven more FCIAC championships and another unbeaten season and Class LL state crown in 1991. The two also coached together with the Norwalk Mariners in the summer, winning several state titles and a pair of New England championships to qualify for the nationals.

And when Barry decided to end his legendary coaching career after the 2003 season, Petrini was his handpicked successor to take over the storied NHS softball program. Although Petrini preferred to retire with Barry, he agreed to become head coach and honor Barry's wishes to make a smooth transition. In his two seasons as head coach, Petrini led the Bears to the FCIAC semifinals in 2004 and to the conference championship game in 2005.

"Fred was just so important with everything he did in our program," Barry, a 2000 Norwalk Old Timers honoree, said. "One thing always came out with Fred, he was always there for the kids. I know it's fashionable to say that, but he really was always there. Plus his sense of humor made him fun to be around. The kids loved him and had a lot of fun.

"He was fun, but he was also very knowledgeable about softball and he made all the players better. I really miss that camaraderie with Fred. We didn't realize it then, but those were the best years of our life."

Petrini taught 19 years at West Rocks while for the past 16 years he has taught Math at Brien McMahon High School and plans to retire from the Norwalk School System this spring. A resident of Danbury, Petrini has been a longtime member of the Laurel Athletic Club and currently serves on the Norwalk Old Timers Executive Board.