

Dennis D'Amato



Dennis D'Amato enjoyed two different sports careers. One as an athlete who played football and baseball, and the other as a successful hockey coach and administrator.

Born in Norwalk, D'Amato grew up just two blocks away from Continental Manor where he's being honored tonight. He attended St. Mary's School, Center Junior High, and Norwalk High School, where he was a three-year member of the football team and the starting quarterback as a junior and senior for coach Jack Cronin.

As a senior during the fall of 1960, D'Amato passed for over 1,000 yards, and among his favorite receivers was another one of tonight's

honorees, Jerry Fishman. D'Amato scored a key touchdown in Norwalk's stunning 30-14 upset of state title contender Danbury on Thanksgiving Day that season before 7,000 people at the old high school field behind City Hall.

In fact, D'Amato accounted for the only touchdown by the Green and White that Fishman didn't score that day. That was also D'Amato's final high school football game, but he went on to play at the University of Connecticut in 1961 and '62 before a knee injury ended his career. He lettered as a QB and safety for UConn's undefeated freshmen team in 1961.

While at Norwalk, D'Amato also played baseball and was a member of the 1961 Fairfield County championship team that also included Fishman, 2003 Old Timers honoree Bobby Schaefer, and 2001 recipient Lee Johnson.

Prior to NHS, D'Amato played Babe Ruth Baseball for the Fire Department team that won a pair of league titles. D'Amato played first base three years without committing an error, while Johnson was the shortstop.

Although his playing days were over, D'Amato would later coach baseball in the Cranbury League with Old Timers President Tom Corbo from 1977-83, in the Norwalk Junior Babe Ruth from 1984-86, and then in the Norwalk Senior Babe Ruth League from 1988-89, again with Corbo and 1997 Old Timers honoree Al Canevari. Together they coached The Hour team to the 1989 league title.

It was right around this same time D'Amato first got involved in hockey. Although he never played himself growing up, his son Darren did and would become an all-state player in high school. And through his son, the elder D'Amato would spend 21 years as a coach, manager and board member in the Mid-Fairfield Youth Hockey Association. He even served as president of the successful organization from 1984-87.

While still president in 1986, D'Amato was very instrumental in forming the MFYHA Midget Blues, a college developmental team for 17 and 18 year-old players that played the best competition regionally and nationally. D'Amato was the team manager and co-head coach from 1986-99, and during those 13 years the team went 257-62 (including 24-1 in 1990), won nine Connecticut Hockey Conference state championships, and a New England Regional championship in 1996. They also finished runner-up in New England five times, were fifth in the USA Hockey National Tournament in 1997, and were ranked in the USA Hockey top 20 for nine straight seasons.

In addition, D'Amato coached over 40 players with the Blues who went on to play Division I college hockey, including three future All-Americans, three Olympians, and four players who made it to the NHL, including 1999 Rookie of the Year Chris Drury.

D'Amato calls his years as manager and co-head coach of the Midget Blues "my most satisfying and best achievement in sports. Playing football and baseball was great fun, but creating a hockey program to fill a glaring need for local area high school players was my proudest achievement."

That wasn't the first time Dennis D'Amato formed a new team, however. In 1957, at the age of 14, he organized and played for the Columbian Squires Boys football team. He even borrowed the old Norwalk Tigers uniforms ("But not the leather helmets," he says) and recruited Vic D'Amato, his father and a former local standout football player, to coach the team.

Now 61, Dennis D'Amato has been with Xerox Corporation in New York for the past 30 years in sales and marketing. He and his wife, the former Sally Sanford, have two children and two grandchildren.