

## *Fred Santarella Posthumous Honoree*



The late **Fred Santarella** made winning a habit during his celebrated sports career.

The personable and always-engaging Santarella, who passed away in 2017, was part of one championship team in high school and almost led a second team to a title, while years later he was a key player on local powerhouse softball teams that won their share of championships.

As a junior at Norwalk High School, Santarella was a member of the Green Wave baseball team that captured the 1961 County Conference crown. He is the ninth player from that team to be honored by the Norwalk Old Timers while head coach Jack Cronin makes 10.

“That was a great team,” Santarella said in a 2012 interview.

That was also the final County Conference championship team as the newly formed Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference began play in the fall of '61.

But it was on the basketball court that Fred Santarella really made his mark during his high school days. In fact, the senior captain very nearly led NHS to the first FCIAC

championship game in that sport.

That '56 Norwalk High team had several players who could light up the scoreboard, players such as Jimmy 'Kirt' Clemons, Jimmy Monroe, Charlie Davis, and Dick Zakhar. But it was Santarella, the Green Wave's starting point guard, who made sure they got the ball in position to score. He was the floor general who directed that high-powered offense and led the team with nine assists a game.

And when he wasn't passing off to a teammate, Santarella could ring up his share of points, too, averaging 14 points a contest to join the other four starters in double figures. In the season opener, it was Santarella's team—high 16 points that led Norwalk to a 62–39 win over upstart Central Catholic, the city's new parochial high school.

He also scored a career-high 21 points as NHS beat highly touted Danbury 69–64 on the road to knock the Hatters out of first place in the West Division. That was part of a seven-game winning streak, and after a one-point loss to Greenwich, Norwalk reeled off seven more victories in a row, starting with a 67–59 win over East Division leader New Canaan. Santarella scored 12 points, but more importantly he played an exceptional defensive game guarding Gary Liberatore, holding the state's leading scorer well below his average.

Santarella and his teammates closed the regular season with a rematch against Danbury. The Hatters, winners of 12 straight since losing to Norwalk, came in 14–1 and in first place in the West, while the Green Wave, which had won 14 of its last 15, was second at 13–2 and 15–2 overall. A Norwalk win would force a one-game playoff for the division title, but Danbury pulled out a 56–54 win before a sellout crowd at NHS.

New Canaan and Danbury, two teams Norwalk beat during the season, ended up playing the first FCIAC basketball championship game with Danbury winning while New Canaan went on to win a state title. That's how good Santarella's Norwalk High team was as the Green Wave finished an impressive 15–4.

Santarella's high school athletic career wasn't over quite yet. He still had one final baseball season at NHS that spring. After graduation he made the transition to slow-pitch softball, which had become popular in Norwalk. He started with Risilo Rollers, who eventually became Singewald Buick, a perennial power that won several city and sectional titles. Santarella later played with the Aces, one of Norwalk's iconic softball teams, where he won a few more tournament titles and city crowns.

But even with all the championship teams he was a part of, one of Santarella's biggest thrills was the chance to play with his son, Dan, an All-FCIAC first baseman at Darien High School, while the two were with the Aces.

And although Fred Santarella lived in Darien for several decades, a part of Norwalk never left him. “I will always have an affinity for Norwalk.”