

Mike Errico Award Partners Cafe

A local sports landmark is the recipient of the Norwalk Old Timers Athletic Association's 2009 Mike Errico Award.

Partners Café has been one of the biggest supporters of Norwalk teams and sporting events for more than a quarter of a century. Located on the corner of Cove and First streets, Partners opened its doors on Oct. 1, 1983, and quickly became a presence in the local sports community.

"When we first opened, one of the first teams we sponsored was a hardball team in the Stamford Twilight League. They were the Partners Pirates," owner Tom Spinola said.

"Then we sponsored a girls softball team, the Partners Café Girls, in the recreation league."

The Partners Café Girls won the city championship in 2002 and again in 2007 when they went undefeated. Then there's the men's softball team Partners has sponsored for the last 25 years which won another city title in 1994. The local restaurant also sponsored a men's basketball team which won three 'A' League city championships in 1987, '88 and '90.

And in 1989, Partners Café captured the city championship in touch football. In addition, Spinola has sponsored a number of youth league sports teams in the city.

But Partners' support of local sports goes even beyond all the teams they sponsor.

"The latest thing we got involved in was with bunch a sailors who have been coming in here for years,"

Spinola pointed out a year ago as Partners got ready to celebrate its 25th anniversary. "Four or five years ago they told me they were going to name the last regatta of the year the Partners Café Cup. They said they named it after us because they love coming in here every Sunday."

At one time, Partners even sponsored a stock car and a golf tournament, with all the proceeds going to all the Little Leagues in town. That's something that's always been close to Spinola's heart since his father is 'Babe' Spinola, who spent nearly three decades as a coach and later president of the Norwalk American Little League, which was eventually named after him.

"My father is one of my biggest idols. What he did for kids is unbelievable," Tommy Spinola said. "He loves sports, and still does."

And so does Partners Café, which always buys a table and program book ad for any sports dinner in town, including the Norwalk Old Timers' annual bash.

"I've been going to the Norwalk Old Timers dinner for 25 years. I never miss that," Spinola said. "I think it's one of the great nights in Norwalk every year."

After most games in which Partners' adult sports teams play, many of the players gather at the restaurant, especially following games at Calf Pasture Beach, only a long fly ball away. Even players from other teams head over to Partners.

Which is exactly what Tommy Spinola envisioned when he created Partners Café.

"We opened up here in 1983 and I just wanted it to be a family place, a Norwalk establishment with good food," he said. "I always wanted the place to be like 'Cheers,' a sports oriented establishment."

Once known as the Triple Play Saloon, Spinola and his business partner at the time bought the business on March 1, 1983, but they didn't open until seven months later as they gutted the whole place and gave it a brand new look.

On Oct. 1, 1983, Partners Café opened for business and a Norwalk sports landmark was born.

Now when you walk in, pictures of Norwalk sports teams and athletes spanning the past seven decades line the walls. From the 1949 Strawberry Hill football team to the 1952 Norwalk Little League World Series champions. From 1966 state champion Norwalk High School basketball team with Calvin Murphy to the 2004 Norwalk Jaguars Pop Warner Football team which won the New England title.

There is also one whole wall covered with photos of FCIAC and state championship teams from Brian McMahon and Norwalk high schools. On another wall there are framed sports articles of noteworthy games and sports figures in town. And on yet another wall are personalized autograph pictures of Willie Mays, Walt Frazier and Phil Rizzuto.

Partners Café has truly become one of the few authentic sports bar and restaurant around.

But it's not all about sports all the time at Partners. With a menu that offers Italian-American cuisine, families flock to Cove Avenue on a nightly basis.

"People have met here and gotten married, and now they come in with their kids," Spinola said. "A few of them even had their weddings here."

Spinola assumed sole ownership of Partners Café in the early 1990s, but his wife and co-host, Debbie, has really become his new partner.

"My wife takes on a lot of the work, especially in the kitchen," he says. "We use a lot of her recipes. I get a lot of the credit, but she does a lot of the work. She does it all to be honest."

But good food aside, Partners Café will always be best known for its connection to Norwalk sports in and outside those four walls. In truth, Partners Café is more than just a sports bar and restaurant. It is a Norwalk institution.

And tonight, Partners Café is the 2009 recipient of the Norwalk Old Timers Mike Errico Award.