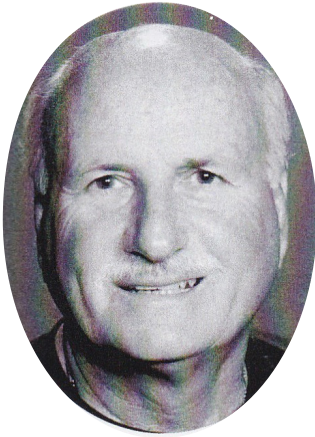


John Zeoli



John Zeoli never thought of himself as a future basketball coach. Certainly not back in 1966 when he was the starting center and grabbing rebounds for the Central Catholic High School basketball team.

Back then no one, not even Zeoli himself, could have ever envisioned he would someday become a high school basketball coach, much less a legendary one.

But 44 years later, John Zeoli, who was born in Norwalk and grew up in Westport, is one of the most successful high school basketball coaches in the state of Florida.

In fact, last season, Zeoli's 29th at DeLand High School, he joined a very select fraternity by recording his 500th career victory, making him one of only three active coaches in the Sunshine State and the first from Central Florida, to reach the milestone at one school.

The Bulldogs' 63-54 victory over Seabreeze High at Daytona Beach on that Jan. 22 night was just the latest in a long list of coaching highlights by the 63-year-old Zeoli. His overall record of 503-286 includes eight conference championships, 10 district titles, four regional crowns and six more regional runner-up finishes.

A six-time conference coach of the year, Zeoli led his 1998-99 team to a 28-3 season, while his 2000 club reached the Florida Final Four.

But what's even more impressive is the fact DeLand competes in Class 6A, the largest school classification in the state.

And to think, it all started at tiny Central Catholic High School in Norwalk for John Zeoli four and a half decades ago.

During the 1965-66 basketball season, Zeoli was a 6-foot-2 senior center for the Cavaliers, who went 17-5 and won the Thruway League championship. The team was led by junior sharp-shooter Joey Pantoja, who averaged 28.8 points a game and scored 44 in the 82-58 win over Our Saviour Lutheran High of The Bronx in the league finals.

The senior captain and starting point guard on that team was John Peters, the current president of the Norwalk Old Timers who will be presenting his former teammate his award tonight. Peters, who went on to become a top basketball official, was second on the team in scoring with a 14.2 average and scored 20 points in the title game.

Meanwhile, Pete Tybursky (7.6), Zeoli (7.4), Jeff Rousseau (6.1) and John Sutton (4.0) rounded out a solid six-man rotation.

"We had a great scorer in Joey Pantoja and the rest of us were role players," Zeoli, who led the Cavaliers in rebounding and was named second-team All-Thruway League, said. "It was a great group of kids and teammates who I wouldn't trade for anything, especially that time at Central Catholic."

Maybe it wasn't such a surprise after all Zeoli became such a successful coach. His mentor when he was playing was one of the best, Lou Orlando, who carved out a pretty impressive legacy himself during his 40 years of coaching, including the first eight seasons at CCHS. Zeoli's junior and senior years were Orlando's first two seasons as a head coach.

"He's the one who got me interested in it," Zeoli said of Orlando, who also relocated in Florida. "I still love the guy. We live a few hours away from each other, but we get out and play golf once in a while.

"He came to a couple of our games last year and saw me coach," Zeoli added. "We went out after and, of course, he critiqued me. He was always tough on us."

Zeoli also played two years of football (for fellow honoree Jerry McDougall) and one year of baseball at Central, and after graduating he went to Graceland College in Iowa and played all three sports in his only year there. He transferred to Daytona Beach Community College and played basketball for a year before transferring to Troy State in Alabama.

Persistent ankle injuries, however, cut his basketball career short and Zeoli transferred again, this time to the University of West Florida in Pensacola, where he received a golf scholarship and graduated in 1971 with his degree in Physical Education.

He moved back to Connecticut, but when he couldn't find a teaching job, he weighed a couple of offers he had down South and took a Phys Ed job at DeLand High School. It was a sort of homecoming for Zeoli, the oldest of five children who would spend summers with his sibling at their grandparents' home in Deland, located halfway between Orlando and Daytona Beach with a population of just over 24,000.

Zeoli started at DeLand in 1978 and has been there ever since. His first taste of coaching was as the varsity assistant and JV basketball coach for three years, compiling a record of 54-7 and winning the conference JV championship in 1980.

Then when the head coach resigned and moved to New Hampshire, Zeoli, 32 at the time, took over as head coach

"A lot of guys were interested in the job, but the principal had enough faith and trust and belief in me to make me the new head coach. It's been the greatest job I ever had."

Zeoli took over a team in 1981-82 that lost a number of key players to graduation.

"They said we would probably not win six games that season and we ended up winning 12," he pointed out.

That would be the start of an incredible three-decade run by Zeoli that still isn't over.

Zeoli's coaching success at DeLand wasn't limited to just basketball, however. He was also the head boys volleyball coach for six years and won five conference championships and had a 49-match winning streak. He was the conference coach of the year five times.

And he also served as head boys golf coach for three years, leading the Bulldogs to a 12th place finish in the state one season.

Prior to moving to Florida, Zeoli's sports activities in Norwalk included playing one year in the Senior City Baseball League with the Broad River Generals, and two years quarterbacking the Rowayton Bears in the Inter-City Touch Football League.

Zeoli and his wife, Annamaria, have two daughters, Heather and Kimberly, and four grandchildren. He also still has family ties in Norwalk and in Westport.