

Hall of Fame

Commander in Chief

Coach Joe Orsene won at a record-setting pace

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Joe Orsene sipped his coffee and talked about each loss as if it just happened.

There was the one in 1961 that spoiled a perfect season. He put his quarterback into a defensive hole, and he got hurt. The Knights lost by two points. There was the one to Middletown the following year that still

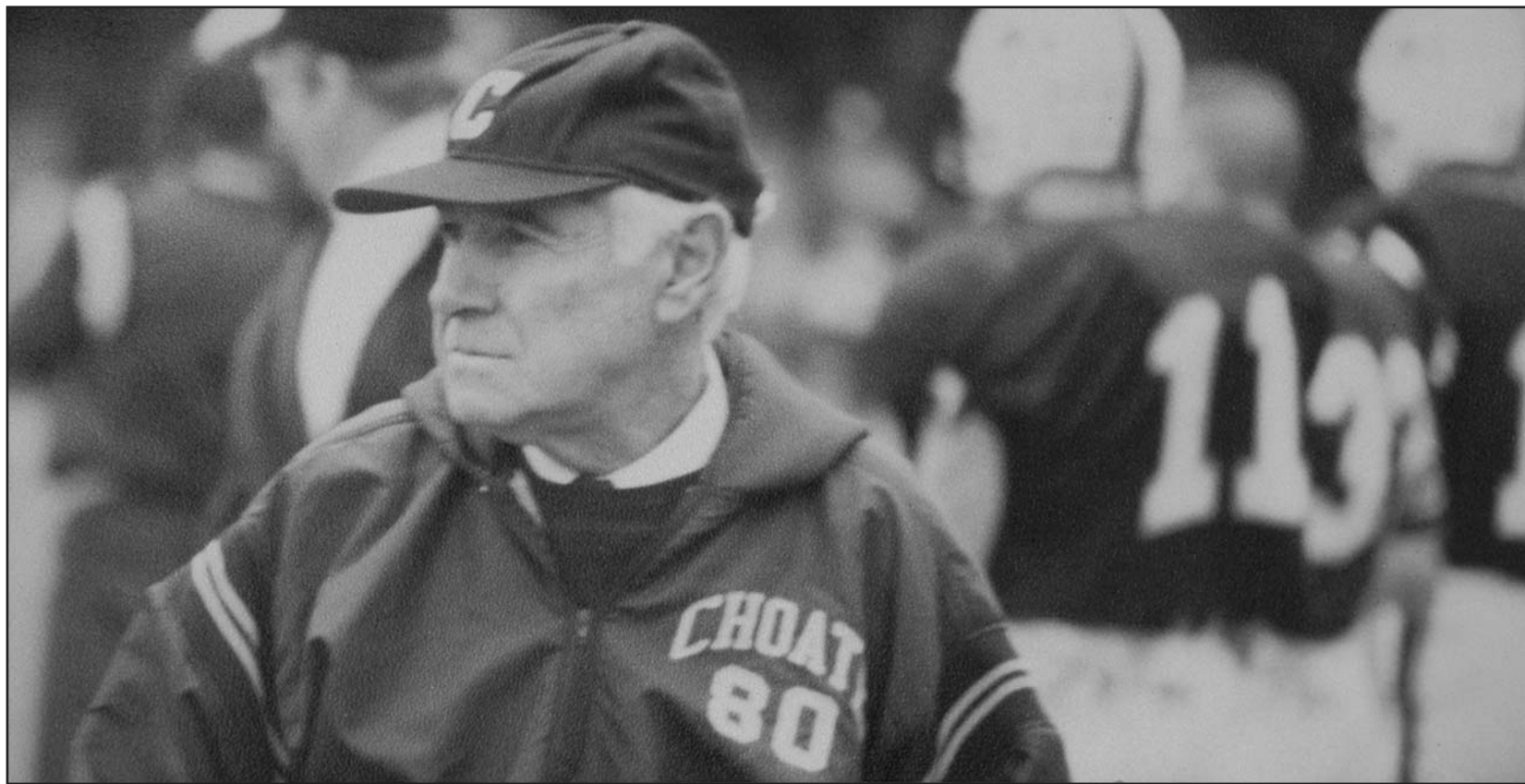
Coach

makes him cringe, and two in 1966 where illness raged through the lineup.

Orsene's eyes flashed as he listed specific plays and precise details like missed tackles and broken plays. He named opposing players, defensive schemes, and the time on the clock.

How is this possible after almost four decades? How does he remember each loss as if he's still scratching an open wound? Simple. Orsene only had four losses his entire career.

"I remember those four losses because we could have won all four of them," he said. "One, we got beat bad, but we didn't have anybody on the field. If Eddie [DellaVecchia] hadn't gotten hurt [in 1961], we would have beaten Woodrow



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Joe Orsene went 50-4-1 over six seasons with Southington High School and set a New England record with a 33-game undefeated streak.

Wilson. It was only my first year coaching, so we didn't have the defenses we had later. Every time I think of that, it makes me sick. That was a tough loss."

No other football coach in the state can boast a 91.8 percent winning percentage. No one else can boast about a 33-game unbeaten streak

that spanned five seasons.

"He was an unbelievable coach, and if you know Joe, he's the nicest, nicest person in the world," said former Blue Knight baseball coach John Fontana, the current CT High School Coaches Association Executive Director. "If Joe stayed there, he would have probably had—even today—91.8 percent because he is so detailed. He was such a meticulous guy with fundamentals, so you knew that he was going to diagram everything with blocking and tackling. You knew he was going to be a great coach. He did it with track, too."

Not bad for a Branford kid that had never stepped onto a football field before coaching the Knights. A reporter once asked him how he ended up with football, and he replied, "You don't have to be an Italian to cook like one."

Orsene was a baseball and basketball player in his youth. He worked his way onto Branford's mens baseball team as a sophomore in high school and became a player-coach after World War II. He battled in the New Haven basketball leagues, and then settled into Southington High School as a teacher in physical education and health.

For three years, Orsene served as a freshman coach for basketball, baseball, and football, learning under storied mentors Jay Fontana and Walt Lozoski. He turned down a head coaching job at Branford, but he never

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John Fontana,
Former SHS baseball coach

regretted the decision.

"Branford's a great town, but it was best for me to come here," he said. "This was like a family, and they really treated me well."

Orsene switched to track as a head coach but continued as an assistant for football and basketball.

Lozoski stepped aside on the girdiron for his half-brother Dan Sekanovic, a division one player from Tennessee. Orsene served as an assistant and took over two years later. It was trial by fire, but he loved it.

"There weren't 20 million coaches like they have today. It was tough," he said. "Baseball and basketball were a picnic, but in football, you've got the line. You've got the offense and the defense. I was out there by myself with 33 players. You had to outfit them, tape

them, everything. I learned the game that way."

Somehow it worked. The Knights posted 8-1 records in each of his first two seasons. A 22-12 loss to Middletown in 1962 was the last one he experienced until his final year.

Orsene's teams were known for their fundamentals and their defense.

Teams were playing zone defenses, but Orsene quickly shifted to a man-to-man rush. Southington went 32-0-1 from 1962-1966 with three unbeaten years in a row. Orsene's worst season was his last one (7-2) in 1966.

"I was lucky. I had guys that understood defense. If you don't have the players, you can't do anything," he said. "We didn't blitz much, but those guys on the line worked and worked on fun-

damentals. Nowadays, you have the spread offense with passing, but in those days you had to stop the run."

Orsene was ahead of his time. In addition to his defensive schemes, he was among the first coaches to practice in shorts in the heat. He committed one week to conditioning at the start of the season, and he allowed water on the field.

These are all common today, but in the 1960s they were revolutionary. It paid off. Orsene's teams outscored opponents, 1278-397. His Knights collected 16 shutouts and allowed just one team to score more than 26 points.

Orsene was invited to speak at three coaches clinics, including a national convention in Cincinnati.

"There aren't many coaches that get the chance to do that," he said. "I was the only high school coach that spoke there, so I was really kind of proud."

Orsene stepped down after 1966, but he didn't leave the game. He spent time as an assistant coach for the Bridgeport Jets and Southern CT State University, and taught at Southington High School until his retirement.

Orsene was one of four coaches selected into the first class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, he will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

To comment on this story, email John GoralSKI@southingtonobserver.com.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Joe Orsene (Football)

Overall Record: 50-4-1

1961 (Record: 8-1)

Sacred Heart	40-18 W
Bristol Eastern	32-0 W
Middletown	6-0 W
Woodrow Wilson	20-22 L
Croft	16-0 W
Cheshire	20-0 W
Crosby	46-14 W
West Haven	26-0 W
Plainville	30-0 W

1964 (Record: 9-0)

Newington	20-19 W
Bristol Eastern	30-0 W
Pulaski	32-26 W
Woodrow Wilson	20-0 W
Middletown	24-0 W
Cheshire	30-0 W
Crosby	56-12 W
Windsor	38-0 W
Plainville	26-8 W

1962 (Record: 8-1)

Sacred Heart	28-12 W
Bristol Eastern	22-0 W
Woodrow Wilson	16-6 W
Croft	16-6 W
Cheshire	30-14 W
Newington	40-8 W
Crosby	22-8 W
Middletown	12-22 L
Plainville	44-6 W

1965 (Record: 9-0)

Newington	36-0 W
Bristol Eastern	20-7 W
Pulaski	22-6 W
Woodrow Wilson	44-20 W
Middletown	28-6 W
Cheshire	26-6 W
Hamden	28-12 W
Windsor	40-12 W
Plainville	38-18 W

1963 (Record: 9-0-1)

St. Bernard	20-17 W
Sacred Heart	14-14 T
Bristol Eastern	34-8 W
Middletown	30-8 W
Woodrow Wilson	32-8 W
Croft	20-8 W
Cheshire	28-12 W
Wilby	24-0 W
Crosby	28-8 W
Plainville	40-26 W

1966 (Record: 7-2)

Newington	46-6 W
Bristol Eastern	14-0 W
Rockville	44-22 W
Woodrow Wilson	32-0 W
Middletown	8-14 L
Pulaski	20-42 L
Hamden	10-0 W
Windsor	36-20 W
Plainville	22-6 W