

Hall of Fame

Joe the Builder

Joseph Abate devoted his time, energy, and resources to support local athletics

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Southington coaches were pacing the baseball field before a spring practice in the early 80s when a thunderous roar swept across the field. The wind began to swirl around the bases. Sand and grass clippings rose into the air. Bewildered coaches looked toward the heavens to see a giant helicopter descending onto the field.

Joseph Abate leapt from the flying machine with a camera and a wide grin. Forget about the hand-drawn blue prints for the upcoming lighting project. Abate wanted to do it right.

Hall of Fame

"We were thinking about putting up lights, so he went up and shot an aerial view so we could space it and do a diagram," said former Southington High School baseball coach John Fontana. "I never asked him to do that, but that was the kind of guy that he was."

Few people have done more for less credit than Joseph Abate. Parents shuffle in and out of booster clubs while their children try out for high school teams. Volunteers donate their Saturdays to the youth fields or their time and money to various causes, but few can come close to Abate's generosity.

There are no fields that carry his name. There are no signs dedicated to his selfless work. For more than two decades Abate helped to shape the landscape for local athletes, using his influence and resources as the president of Tilcon Tomasso, Inc. to build fields and scoreboards for the local youth.

"You can go through many, many boosters in this town. They've all done a lot, but I've never seen anyone do as much to change as many programs for as many different sports as Joe Abate," said Fontana. "He never cared about publicity. He never asked for anything in return. He cared about kids, and that was it."

It was nothing to feel the rumble of a steamroller on a morning in March as it roared down Pleasant Street to prepare the fields for another spring season. It was an ordinary sight to see Tomasso cranes creep across the baseball field to carry electricians to broken lights. It was common to see Abate strolling through empty lots with a hardhat and a handful of permits. A few weeks later, a baseball field or basketball courts filled another corner of town.

It was his money, his time, and his company's resources. There were no bake sales or fundraising, only Abate and his crew.

	Southington Sports Hall of Fame
	Joseph Abate (Booster)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • William Burns Memorial Award recipient (New Britain). • Former president of Tilcon Tomasso, Inc. <p style="text-align: center;">Building Projects (Donated)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributed resources, time, expertise to baseball field light project on John J. Fontana field (SHS). • Field maintenance and repair of SHS sports fields. • Re-sodded SHS football field multiple times. • Installed scoreboards on SHS football and baseball fields. • Provided equipment to repair lights or roll fields. • Installed asphalt walkways at the Joseph Fontana Sports Complex (SHS). • Installed basketball courts behind St. Thomas school. • Built batting cages at the high school. • Installed two local Babe Ruth baseball fields. • Supported multiple sports programs with financial donations, time, and resources. 	

“

You can go through many,
many boosters in this town.
They've all done a lot,
but I've never seen anyone do as much
to change as many programs
for as many different sports as Joe Abate.

”

John Fontana,
Former SHS baseball coach

"I did it because I was able to do it. That was the main thing," Abate said about his projects through the years. "I had the wherewithal and ability to get the equipment, and I knew how to do it. Southington had such great teams. We had such great kids and great programs that I didn't want to see them playing on inferior fields."

Abate's projects are too many to list. He built a pair of Babe Ruth baseball fields that are still in use today. He built batting cages at the high school, foundations for various projects, walkways, and basketball courts. He donated money to teams for trophies and equipment. He re-sodded the high school football field when it was one of the best surfaces in the state. He helped install scoreboards on a number of fields and helped keep the fields level for the safety of the athletes.

"My uncle wanted to redo the football field a couple of times, and trucks just pulled up," Fontana said. "They put all new loom down. They dug up the old turf. The list just goes on and on.

You could never repay him for what he's done for this town. I think all of the pride that people took in our fields was because of his contributions."

When it was needed, he'd dip into his pocketbook. When he was able, he'd reorganize his work schedule to finish his projects. He did it in the years before his daughters entered the high school. He did it for years after his son graduated college. He helped out programs whether or not his children played, and he did it all in anonymity.

"I was just lucky to be in the position I was in to be able to do what I was doing," Abate said. "It was easy because teams kept winning games. I can still remember all of the wins and the games we played for championships. It was a great time. It was almost like I was back in it again. I was participating."

When he decided on a project, Abate was committed to doing it right. He'd file for proper permits. He'd use the best materials, and he'd personally supervise every detail from start to finish.



SUBMITTED

Nobody was more important than Joseph Abate, above, when it came to building sports infrastructure. Abate used his resources and influence in the 80s and 90s as the president of Tilcon Tomasso, Inc. to build fields, lights, and scoreboards at the high school and throughout Southington.

"If I could do something, I would do it, but I was going to do it the right way. I was going to give the best of everything," he said. "I knew a lot about grading. I understood about materials, and I was able to get a hold of those materials. I was able to get the right stones, the right screening, and the right product. I was a nut over that stuff. I wanted to make sure that every single line was right. I wanted the grass just right. It was fun, and it was a labor of love."

As a three-sport athlete in New Britain, Abate had won the coveted William Burns Memorial Award and Scholarship. The award is given to a graduating student-athletes in order to pursue a bachelor's or associate's degree at an accredited two-year or four-year college or university. He used athletics as a way to further his education. He used his education to climb to the top at Tilcon Tomasso, and he used his success as a way to give back to his community.

"I was a nut for athletics," he said. "Of course, once I got into business, I wasn't able to play any more, so I immersed myself into the other part of the game.

As far as the time that was concerned, I was lucky. I was the CEO. I was the president of the company, so I was able to get away. Still it was hard. You had to get away at 3 or 3:30, and it's hard to do that sometimes when you're running a company with 5,600 employees. We had over 1,000 in Connecticut, but they weren't all in the state."

Members of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee took notice of Abate's sacrifice and donation over the years. His contributions are unparalleled, and his influence is still being felt. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Abate will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"I'm honored and also humbled that I'm considered as any kind of help for the things that we did along the way to perpetuate Southington sports," he said. "Hopefully, we can keep this thing going. I think it's one of the nicest and greatest sports programs going on, especially when I see all these other towns cutting things. I'm very honored to be a part of it, and I will always be a supporter of Southington."