

## Southington Sports Hall of Fame

# The new Testa-ment

## Joe Testa was a spark for Blue Knight soccer

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SPORTS WRITER

Few returning players even knew the name of the new Italian student in 1974 when he strolled onto the Recreation Park soccer field for an early Southington High School tryout. Tall and thin like a blade of grass, the young newcomer waited in the wings for practice to begin.

He was fairly new to the country. His English wasn't that great. He wore sneakers instead of cleats, and shadowed his cousin while teammates greeted one another to talk about summer vacations, but all it took was the coach's whistle at the start of practice and Joe Testa became a household name.

For a young man looking to fit into his new hometown, the game of soccer became a precious gift.

### Hall of Fame

"I was trying to adjust because I had just moved from Italy to Bridgeport to Southington," said Testa. "I was trying to make friends. I didn't know anyone else, but the players just took me in and embraced me. They made me feel at home, and that was very, very important to me at that age. I was accepted. I was part of the team and it was pretty special."

Testa's timing couldn't have been any better. It had been five years since Southington had rolled out their new fall sports program, and the fledgling soccer team was still struggling with low numbers, inexperience, and a full varsity schedule. The Knights had shown early success as they flirted with .500 records in their first two seasons, but reality had settled in with a series of three losing seasons culminating in a 3-9-2 record in 1973.

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Dan Murawski,  
Former SHS soccer coach

Testa was about to put Southington on the map for good.

"We had been building the team up for a few years, and we were just starting to gel better," said former Blue Knight soccer coach Dan Murawski. "He was really the crowning touch. His skill level was fantastic, but he was just a very gifted player. I just can't say enough about him."

Testa's skill had been hammered out on sandy fields in Italy where the young boy had clawed his way onto the town's teenaged teams. Playing against boys twice his age, the young Testa held his own. Those skills helped him to slip right into the lineup at Bridgeport Central when his family moved to the United States at the start of his junior year. When his family settled in Southington the following season, Testa was already a proven player in the varsity ranks.

"He was so tremendously skilled," said Murawski. "He wasn't that fast, but he just had a great ball handling ability. He was tall for a soccer player, and he was thin. Obviously, he could finish. When he got by everybody, he could just tap it in, but it was his ball-control ability and

dribbling ability that really gave him the skill with the soccer ball."

It was a bicycle kick during a pre-season game in Cheshire that won him over to teammates. It was his ability to shuffle the ball to scorers that earned him a spot as a forward on Southington's opening day roster. Suddenly, the Knights were a competitive force as they rallied for their first season with double digit victories (10-2-2), their first conference championship title, and their first invitation to the postseason tournament.

Testa led the way as Southington's first 10-goal scorer. "Perhaps 10 goals doesn't seem like that much now, but it was huge for us back then," said Murawski. "He was our first all-stater, and he was just a tremendously skilled kid and a great kid with a great personality."

And those sneakers. Teammates and opponents had a distinct advantage with their cleats on the grassy fields, but it didn't seem to matter. Testa grew up playing barefoot on dirt fields in Italy, so he fought the idea of cleats until coaches finally wore him down.

"I just couldn't get a good swing on the ball with cleats. I was so used to playing with sneakers, so that's what I did," he said. "Coach finally talked me into wearing cleats on my planting foot, so I ended up buying a pair after all. I was able to plant with my left foot and strike it with my right with my sneakers. It just felt pure. I felt more at ease. I was able to make better contact, and I was more accurate with sneakers."

Nobody can deny it. His efforts drew attention from college coaches and former UConn coach Joe Morrone offered him a chance to play for the Huskies at a time when they were building toward their first national title. Testa turned down the offer.

"He was our speaker at the year-ending banquet at the old Popular Restaurant. We took a picture together. He invited me up to UConn, but it just didn't work out for me. At the time, it was difficult for my parents, so I was leaning more toward helping out the family," he said. "It was an inspiration to me because they had such a good team back



JOHN GORALSKI

Former SHS standout Joe Testa offers some tips to a player as his Wilcox Tech team prepares for the upcoming postseason.

then. They were winning national championships and everything. For him to approach me and ask me to try out was a highlight to my career."

"He certainly could have been a good player there," said Murawski. "He was definitely a very skilled player that just loved the game."

That's why it didn't surprise anybody when Testa began to pop up in coaching circles. He was just too good to stay away from the game. He spent brief stints as a head coach at Cuginchaug High School and Platt High School followed by a few years as Cheshire's freshman coach before settling in at Wilcox Tech in 2012.

Once again, it was the perfect fit. The coach quickly disbanded the old, direct style of play in favor of a more fundamental, possession offense and the team turned around quickly. The young, inexperienced program that struggled to a 5-9-1 record in his first year played themselves to a 10-5-1 record this fall and earned a home game in the first round of the Class M tournament.

Just like he did at Southington, Testa quickly turned a sub-.500 team into a 10 win contender.

"The kids fought Joe on several levels with their attitudes and play, but Joe handled the situation well with diligence, dedication, and perseverance. It wasn't long before he won them over," said Wilcox Tech Athletic Director Sue Perry. "He has a vast knowledge of the game, an extreme dedication to the players, excellent organizational skills, a tremendous sense of

humor, a great degree of flexibility, and so many other great characteristics and attributes that make him an outstanding and charismatic coach."

Testa said that coaching was just the next logical step for a man that loves the game of soccer with all his heart.

"It's so great to get them involved in the game, teach them what I know, and watch them grow. To me, it gives me the same thrill that I got from playing," he said. "Soccer has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I can't remember anything else. As you get older you continue to play in the 30 leagues, the 40 leagues, and the 50 leagues, but at some point I knew I had to start giving something back."

It was no surprise that Southington Sports Hall of Fame officials announced that Testa would be inducted into the local sports hall of fame. Perhaps it was because of the way that he launched the Blue Knights into a competitive program. Perhaps it's the way he continues to try to shape the game.

"I just want to be remembered as someone who gave it all he had and definitely played for the team," he said. "I played anywhere that Coach Murawski wanted me to play. Maybe as a pure forward I might have been able to score more goals, but you have to play players where they fit best. I hope that there were a lot of other players that benefited from that. We won a lot of games, and that's what it's all about."

On Thursday, Nov. 14, he was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

