

Hall of Fame

The good doctor

Mike Lentiere has been the man behind the scenes

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

A few years ago, a hard-hit baseball skipped through the Southington infield and hit a Conard player in the face like a bullet at point-blank range. Blue Knight assistant coach Mike Lentiere, a dentist by day, sprung onto the field and steadied the boy as he fell to the ground.

The player looked up at Lentiere and asked about the damage. "Coach, will I be okay," he asked as blood dripped from his chin. "I have the prom tomorrow night."

"I felt so bad for him," said Lentiere. "I've seen a couple accidents. Sure, we've had to do some emergency stuff. It's scary, but who else is going to do it? You've got to come through."

Booster

When it comes to coming through, nobody has done it better Dr. Michael Lentiere. For more than 20 years, he's wandered the sidelines anonymously. Unpaid, unknown, and unheralded, Lentiere seems almost too good to be true. Few have contributed behind the scenes as much as the good doctor.

"When you talk about boosters, you're talking about somebody who doesn't care for anything in

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John Fontana,
Former SHS coach and athletic director

return," said former Blue Knight baseball coach John Fontana. "That's Mike Lentiere. He has definitely gone beyond the call of duty. He didn't get one dime for being an assistant coach. Not only was he the assistant coach, he had to shut down his office to do it. He actually lost money. It's incredible."

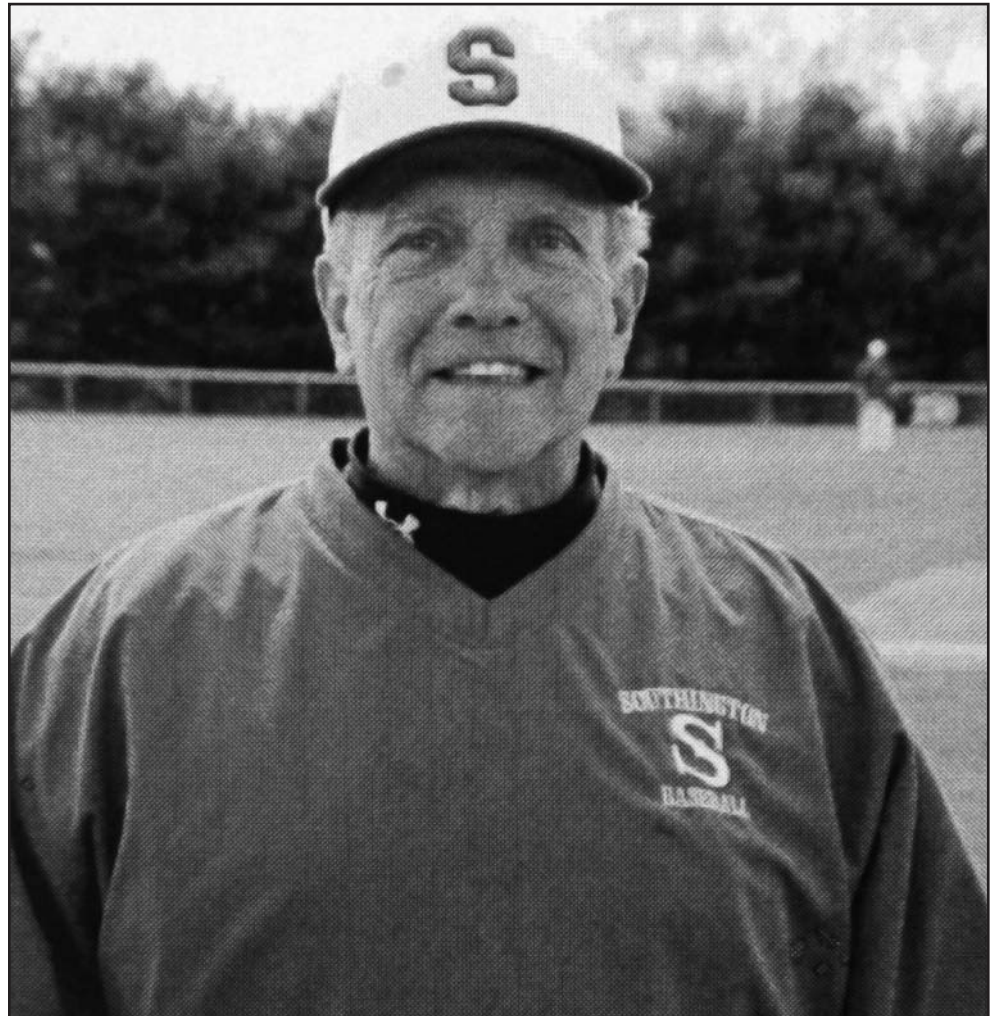
Fontana first turned to Lentiere in 1983 to help upgrade the school's facilities. Lentiere rolled up his sleeves and jumped on for the ride. He was responsible for lighting the varsity field. He was in charge of the early sprinkler system. He raised money, petitioned the local committees, and managed the vendors. When it came to the lights on the baseball field, Lentiere donated about \$5,000 of his own money to purchase one of the lamps.

"We did it specifically so

that parents could get out there—the ones that couldn't get there during the day—to watch their kids play," he said. At the time, there were very few high school fields with lights. "Ever since we've had those lights up, it's been great. We play about six or seven night games, and I'm happy we did it."

His volunteering didn't end when his children graduated. His son left for college in 1988, but Fontana turned to Lentiere once again. Fontana needed someone at third base, and Lentiere jumped at the chance. The rest was history.

"He played ball, so it wasn't like he just wanted to give his time like a lot of parents do through Little League," said Fontana. "I trusted him at third base. It was just like me being over



COURTESY 2009 SHS BASEBALL YEARBOOK

Mike Lentiere has been a volunteer coach at Southington High School since 1988, but that's just the start of his volunteer work.

there. We knew each other's thoughts, and it made it a lot easier."

He impressed one of his players so much that, when Steve Matczyk inherited the team after Fontana's retirement, the former Blue Knight player kept Lentiere on the sidelines. Matczyk said it was crucial to his early success.

"He'd been working with kids for a ton of years, so he was a great sounding board when I was a young coach," Matczyk said. "I threw things at him and to this day he'll call me or see me at practice and say, 'Let's do this, or let's do that.' He has a great insight, and you need that other person. It's easy to get askew from what you should be doing if the team's clicking or not clicking. He's given me and the team such good information and good advice."

Lentiere's commitment to Southington baseball isn't limited to the Knights. He coached his son's teams at Southington Western Little League and stayed on as league president once his son moved on to the high school team. Lentiere advanced to the district level and began to umpire games. He's spent countless hours on the diamond.

"I just love baseball whether it's the Little League or the high school or softball. It's my game and it's my escape from drilling teeth. It's really my way out," he

said. "When I come home, my blood pressure's down about 15 points. I might be sorry if we lost a game, but it's not always will be. You know?"

Lentiere said that his family has been very supportive when it comes to the hours spent on his passions. "One day my wife was asked how she could have me out all the time playing baseball, and she really shocked me," he said. "She doesn't say much, but she said that most women that have to find their husbands have to go to a bar. All she has to do is find a baseball field."

To this day, he's committed to Little League as an umpire in chief of the Eastern Region. He oversees the organization's officials from Maine to Maryland. In 1995 Lentiere got his chance to umpire at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, PA, and he still contribute to the event as a replay official. He earned the Little League's President's Award for his years of continued service.

"You have to take into consideration what he's done outside of the town, too, with the Little League. He's done work state-wide, at the national level, and at the world level," said Matczyk. "His commitment to the youth of Southington is fantastic, but he also goes out to neighboring towns. He impacts everyone with the Little League World

Series."

That's why officials selected Lentiere as the first booster volunteer to be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. With his commitment at the varsity level, the youth level, and the national level, it was an easy decision.

"Most people would do a little here or there, but I don't think there's anybody who's done as much and for as long a period of time as he's done," said Fontana. "For 15 or 16 years, he came south with me to Florida, and our records were incredible because of the job he did. Then, when it came to fundraising, he was always at the top. It is just amazing what he did for nothing."

Lentiere will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf on Wednesday, Nov. 10. Lentiere credits the kids.

"It's the kids. The athletes are still the ones that make it fun. I always say at the end of every season that this is going to be my last year, but somebody who's a sophomore or a junior comes up to me and asks me to stay," he said. "I don't see an end to it, so I'm not looking forward to retirement. As long as Steve wants me there, I'll be there."

To comment on this story or to contact sports writer John Goralski, email him at jgoralski@southingtonobserver.com.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame



Inside the Numbers

- Coordinated baseball field light project at John J. Fontana field (SHS)
- Coordinated sprinkler system project at John J. Fontana field (SHS)
- Inducted into the Plainville Sports Hall of Fame (2010)
- John E. Toffolon Memorial Distinguished Service Award recipient (Plainville Sports Hall of Fame, 2010)
- CT Sports Writers Alliance Good Sport Award recipient (2001)

Southington High School

- Unpaid Assistant Coach (Since 1988)
- Coordinated Florida and Baltimore spring trips for SHS baseball team
- Former financial officer SHS baseball
- Former financial officer SHS softball
- Assistant coach of the year by the CT High School Coaches Association

Southington Western Little League

- Former coach
- Former league president

Little League

- CT District 5 Little League umpire
- Little League World Series Umpire (1995)
- Little League World Series Replay Official (2010)
- Former Assistant Eastern Region Umpire-in-Chief
- Current Eastern Region Umpire-in-Chief
- Received the President's Award for outstanding volunteer service