

Hall of Fame

The architect

Joseph J. Fontana helped build Southington sports

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Joseph 'Jay' Fontana was a fundamentalist, a perfectionist, and a drill sergeant. He knew what he wanted to accomplish, and he wouldn't settle for anything less.

Take extra points. In the late 1940s, teams didn't kick the ball. They ran. Coach Fontana liked to run off-tackle. So when the sun was setting at the end of practice, Fontana would line his players up at the three-yard line and run off tackle as long as it took to get it right.

Coach

"Everybody in the state knew that we ran off-tackle for the extra point. They would pile 11 guys there, and it didn't make any difference," said his nephew John Fontana who still cringes when he thinks about those practices. "One day we ran that extra point 47 consecutive times at the end of practice. Forty-seven times! He would just sit there and say, 'Do it again.' Everybody knew it was coming. He wanted everybody laying on the ground at the end. You blocked. You ran, and we got those points all the time."

Few coaches were as successful as Fontana, and it came down to preparation. From 1932-1954, he collected 139 victories on the gridiron with just 38 losses and 14 ties. Southington collected four undefeated seasons and finished nine more seasons with just one loss. Teams knew what was coming, but they just couldn't stop it.

"If you ask guys that go back, they'd probably tell you that my uncle was the best football coach in the state...ever," said his nephew. "He was asked to go to college coaches and sit with them to go through things. College coaches would come here just to talk to him. He was always doing diagrams with them. I played for him, and he was an exceptional, exceptional coach."

At the time, most teams ran some version of the single wing, and they pounded the ball off-tackle or up the middle. Fontana searched for any way to give his team the edge. He designed a play called the 'Buck Lateral' which used misdirection by the fullback, a couple of pitches, and an



FILE PHOTO

Former Southington Athletic Director Joseph J. Fontana, left, stands with Blue Knight coach Walter Lozoski.

unexpected pass down the field.

College coaches began to implement the package, and it began to spread.

"He designed all of those plays," said the younger Fontana. "They were all his, and they went national. College coaches used to use them. He was such an innovator off the single wing. All of that was designed here, and college guys would take it and use it."

Why, then, did he stay at his hometown high school? Why wouldn't he take flight for greener pastures? It wasn't like he didn't have his chances.

"He had a passion for Southington that maybe five people have ever had," John said. "Some people like this town. Some people love it, but he had a passion for it."

For 47 years, that passion drove his service, first as coach and later as athletic director. From his start in 1932, Fontana's baseball teams went 190-23. They collected nine conference titles and finished as runners up four other times. It culminated in his first undefeated season and state title in 1961.

When his nephew tried to fill his shoes the following year, Fontana told him that success takes a lot more

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John Fontana,
Nephew

than wishful thinking.

"I told him that, by the time I was through, people were going to forget that there's football in this town," he said. "He told me to sit down. He told me that my cocky attitude would never produce a winning team."

For his nephew, it was the start of a storied coaching career. For the Athletic Director uncle, it was just another opportunity to mentor an up-and-coming coach.

"Nowadays, you go through courses to be an

AD," his nephew said. "Back then, you'd hope that your athletic knowledge was enough so that you'd be a good AD. He stood alone."

Dom D'Angelo, a former player under Fontana and a successor as coach and athletic director, credits his mentor for his own success.

"He had a determination that you just can surpass," D'Angelo said. "He just loved the game. He was a great athlete, himself, when he played. He had such a love and desire that he just drove people that he wanted to emulate him."

Gil Varjas, a member of the Southington High School baseball hall of fame and a storied coach at New London, said that the thing he remembers the most was the first day of baseball practice when the team would gather at the edge of the field like a group of eager toddlers at daybreak on Christmas morning. They'd huddle in a group at the edge of the field and wait for the unmistakable sounds of Santa Claus swooping in on his sled.

They were waiting for Fontana to make his annual appearance.

"We used to use wooden bats at that time, and he used to come in with his car. He'd drive in, open the trunk, and we'd all get bats.

Southington Sports Hall of Fame



Inside the Numbers

Overall coaching record: 329-61-14

Football (1932-1954)

- Overall Record: 139-38-14
- 4 undefeated teams
- 9 seasons with one loss

Baseball (1932-1961)

- Overall Record: 190-23
- 9 conference titles
- 1 state title (1961) and 4 runners-up
- 1 undefeated season (1961)

- 47 years of service in the Southington school system as Athletic Director and coach.
- 9 CIAC Merit Awards

- CT High School Coaches Association Past President Award (1966)

- CT Sports Writers Association Gold Key Award (1968)

- National High School Athletic Coaches Association DSA Award (1968)
- Unico Man of the Year (1949)

- Citation by CT Association of Secondary Schools (1973)
- Citation by National Federation of Secondary Schools (1975)
- IAABO Commissioner's Citation by CT State Board of Basketball Officials (1976)
- Inducted into CT High School Hall of Fame (1978)

Southington HS Athletic Complex named as 'Joseph J. Fontana Complex' (1975)

That was such a big deal at the time," said Varjas. "He was a good guy. He had good teams, and we always had everything we wanted."

Fontana's reputation drew coaches like Bob Wittneben to town. In the early 70s, Southington was interested in starting a wrestling program, so they turned to Wittneben to get them started. He remembers being the start-up coach surrounded by the established programs, but he was never treated that way by Fontana.

"He hired me and wanted me to build the program. He told me that whatever I needed, he'd get and he did," Wittneben said. "If I needed a new mat, or I needed a place to practice, or I wanted to go someplace, he'd figure out a way for me to do it. We traveled a lot around the state—to Stamford and Hartford and Simsbury—We went to the places we needed to wrestle, and he never said that he wouldn't pay for anything. He was terrific."

Teams flourished, and the town continued to grow.

Southington became a leader in sports throughout the state and a frontrunner in women's sports. When it came time to christen the new sports fields at the current high school, town officials never hesitated.

It's not just the football field that carries his name. It's the pathways, the practice fields, and the fence that runs around it. It was the house that Fontana built, and the Joseph J. Fontana complex was dedicated in 1975.

Now, Fontana is one of four coaches to represent the town in 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. For tickets, contact Jim Verderame, (860) 628-7335.

"He set standards that are really tough to follow," said John. "I think it would have been important to him because this was his town."

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