

# The News-Herald

The Voice of Downriver

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*Growing in Faith, Knowledge and Community*



Opinion

## KARL ZIOMEK: Memorial would be fitting tribute to an old friend

Castignola was Trenton's football coach for what seemed like forever. He came to Trenton in the halcyon days of the 1960s, via Monroe Catholic Central, just a car trip to the south.

I ran into Jack head-first during my own playing days at Edsel Ford High School in Dearborn. Edsel and Trenton were in the same league back then — the Suburban Eight — and the two teams were bitter rivals. In my final two years at Edsel, we beat Jack's bunch handily in Trenton on our way to a league title before they bounced back and beat us at our place on their way to a conference championship.

Back then, I knew of Jack Castignola, but hardly knew him. A half-decade later, that would all change.

I came aboard The News-Herald in November 1979 to replace longtime sports editor Bob Graham, who was dying of cancer. Once I got my feet wet, one of the most enjoyable parts of my job was dealing with Jack each week of the football season — and eventually much more than that.

Trenton was the best football program Downriver at that time — much like Allen Park is now. Most measured their own program against Trenton's.

But unlike Allen Park's multifaceted program, Trenton's was much simpler. And there was good reason for that.

Jack Castignola was an athletically small, thin man with glasses and salt-and-pepper hair, his head usually jammed inside a baseball cap. He talked with an Ohio twang — similar, but not exactly the same type of speech pattern I'd hear from my parents' relatives who lived in the Wheeling, W. Va., area.

While many football programs were attempting to modernize with wishbone attacks or passing fancies back then, Jack's Trenton teams ran basic smash-mouth football.

He had graduated from New Philadelphia High School in Ohio before World War II, and kept a lot of those basic concepts with him.

Bo Schembechler once said that he'd pay the price of admission to watch former Ohio State University Coach Woody Hayes draw up the off-tackle plunge on the blackboard and teach it to the young men in front of him. Hayes, the legendary coach, was known as one of the best teachers of the game ever. He made "three yards and a cloud of dust" into an art form.

Well, who do you think Jack played his high school ball for in New Philadelphia?

That's right, Woody.

Jack took that type of football with him wherever he went. At Trenton, the off-tackle run was an art form to his players and was the program's bread and butter.

If it wasn't Jimmy Mans, it was Jeff Whiteside or John Milligan. The quarterback would take the snap, put the ball into one of their bellies and get the heck out of the way.

They'd burrow into the line of scrimmage behind a John Ghindia, a Frank Simone, a Steve Popielec or a Vince DeFelice. Sometimes, the defenders didn't even have to tackle the running back — he'd just lean forward so hard during his plunge that he'd finally fall down and skid to a stop on his own. The linebackers would just fall on him.

Not to say that Jack's offense lacked imagination. When the defense finally started committing everything it had to "the plunge," he'd release his tight end on a banana pattern down the hash marks. He'd usually be wide open for a touchdown.

No one could complain about a lack of imagination. In more than 30 years of coaching high school football, Jack's teams won 231 times. The only thing that could stop Coach Jack was cancer.

That final season, in the mid-'80s, Jack shared with me that he hadn't been feeling well. Something was wrong in his digestive system. He told me the doctors wanted to run a tube down his throat and get a better look.

Shortly afterward, he told me they found a tumor. Inoperable cancer.

For a couple of football guys used to talking about the previous night's game, that conversation was almost surreal.

After all, talking to Jack, in many ways, was like talking to my own parents. Here I was, 20-

something, sharing details about inoperable cancer with a man in his 60s.

It didn't seem fair then, and it still doesn't seem fair now.

After all, this was a Marine who hit the beaches at Iwo Jima. I don't know how we got on that story, but we stayed on it for a lengthy period of time when Jack found out that my father, too, had been part of that Marine attack force in WWII.

"I was probably in a landing craft behind him," he said. "Or maybe in front."

He's the same guy who'd pull football statistics out of his hat when he was talking to you — and you never knew whether he was right or not.

I remember the Detroit Free Press' Mick McCabe once asking me about a certain Trenton running back who was averaging over 10 yards per carry.

"That can't be right, can it?" Mick said. "You know how Jack can be with stats. ..."

Castignola was the guy who spent a long evening with me and a few others at a small pub in Riverview after one of our old All-Downriver football team meetings. If I remember correctly, Jack had nominated all of his starters for some type of award. But that was just Jack being Jack.

Over a few beers afterward, Castignola, Jim Whiteside (another one of his coaches) and I compared notes on the old Trenton-Edsel rivalry.

Someone mentioned Edsel's blocking, and Whiteside blurted out: "You guys never blocked anyone. You may have screened some guys, but you just had that (Ralph) Plummer or (Mike) Booth running around people."

To say the least, that conversation lasted well into the night.

After Jack's cancer was confirmed, the season ground its way to a conclusion. I couldn't help but think that every time I saw him — coming off a bus, walking to the field, on the sidelines — it would be one of the last times I'd see him as a Trenton coach.

I remember how his team beat the heck out of a good Fordson team in Dearborn on a chilly day late in the season, and how the end of the season came in a cold, driving rain at Lansing Sexton in the state playoffs.

And the emptiness I felt leaving the field.

I think the last time I saw Jack alive was, oddly enough, at a nondescript boys' basketball game that winter. It was a Tuesday night, not many people in the stands. I was sitting with some other coaches I knew off in a corner of the stands when Castignola walked into the gym and made a beeline for us.

He was in the middle of his cancer treatments, but he was in a great mood. We spent the night alternating between the game being played in front of us and jokes and quips about the past.

A short time after that, Jack passed away. For me, Trenton High School was never the same.

I can understand the feelings a lot of old players and school alumni feel about Jack Castignola. He was a good teacher, a good coach and a good man.

I'm sure the Board of Education eventually will do the right thing in his memory.

If it was my decision, I'd make an area within Farrer Field called the Jack Castignola Community Memorial Garden. Put a statue of Jack in there, along with others as they come along and deserve it.

Just make sure that the statue is pointed at the field. Jack would like that.

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## **Comments**

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of [thenewsherald.com](http://thenewsherald.com).

Mary Briere wrote on Sep 23, 2008 9:30 PM:

" Well done, Karl.

I have fond memories of Jack. My father lived for Friday night football at Trenton. With the exception of having life saving heart surgery in the late 80's, for about 40 years he never missed a Trenton game. Never. Even went to most JV and Freshman games, as well as many practices. That was what he loved. "Most Loyal Fan" read the trophy Jack gave to him one year at one of the many banquets my dad was invited to. I still have it. Jack was just that way.

To this day, and to much of my friend's dismay, I am still a fan of Ohio football. I just never warmed up to Michigan after sitting with my dad over many years watching many games. I remeber going to a Trenton game in Sandusky with him. He would have gone anywhere to watch his beloved Trenton play. And he loved Jack.

He, too was from Ohio...about 45 minutes from New Philadelphia. There was just that connection.

Fond memories indeed!

Bravo on an article well written....you captured the Jack we knew. "