

Rich Fisher: Hamilton mourns loss of athletic icon Chuck Giambelluca [10/28/2020]

The voice was unmistakable. Deep, slightly nasally, and loud. Boy, was it loud.

But that's good, because everyone wanted to hear what that voice had to say, whether they agreed with it or not.

As the center of attention at Fred & Pete's Deli, Broad Street Diner, the backroom of Mercer Locker Room sporting goods store or in the Broad Street Park dugout, Chuck Giambelluca could be heard.

"Oh yeah," Tinker Johnson, who played for and coached with Giambelluca on BSP, said with a laugh. "You knew he was there. And he wanted you to know he was there!"

Sadly, he is there no longer. The voice has been silenced way too soon for anyone who knew him.

Giambelluca, an A-list celebrity in Hamilton Township and Mercer County athletic circles, was claimed by COVID-19 on Oct. 9 at the age of 77.

"He was simply the best there was," stated Rider pitching coach Mike Petrowski, the only man besides Giambelluca to manage Post 313 to a New Jersey American Legion state championship. "He molded and changed so many lives."

Giambelluca is most famously associated with Broad Street Park, which he managed from 1970 to 2005 before becoming the general manager until 2019. Hamilton West Athletic Director John Costantino, the current Post 313 manager, played three years for him and also worked closely with him when Costantino coached the Hornets baseball team.

"He is an icon in Hamilton Township sports," Costantino said. "It's hard to even put into words what Chuck meant to us as a coach, mentor and a friend. He was a straight shooter and told you like it was, usually in a colorful way. He didn't use kid gloves. I respected his honesty and tried to live up to his expectations on the field every day."

BSP is just one of Giambelluca's legacies. A permanent backdrop at Mercerville's Fred & Pete's Deli was a gang of ageless wonders arguing about countless subjects in a booth before adjourning to the front of the eatery for another two hours. Giambelluca was the ringleader, with close friend Joe Gorla and an army of others by his side.

"I started going to Fred & Pete's on a steady basis in 1998, and Chuck always held court, whether it was inside or outside," former Steinert baseball coach/athletic director Rich Giallella said. "Many times it got heated, whether it was sports, politics or whatever. He was always one of the mainstays of the talk. You'd sit there and listen and got nothing done half the time, and no one's opinion ever got changed."

One thing that surely never changed was the fierce rivalry between Post 31 and Post 313. Hamilton manager/MCALL President Rick Freeman's teams had some memorable wars with Giambelluca's squads for 30 years. But off the field, the respect remained constant on both sides.

"That's pretty amazing, isn't it," Freeman said. "Chuck was a local legend. He was our longest-serving member ever, lasting almost 50 years. With that experience comes wisdom. A lot of guys leaned on him, not just for coaching acumen but for things that happened in the league. He was a trusted advisor for so many guys."

Giambelluca continued to care about the league beyond his managerial career, as he and Gorla began a fundraiser when they opened the "Chuck Wagon" food stand, where spectators at area sporting events could purchase burgers, hot dogs, pork roll sandwiches and drinks.

By then Chuck had long been a businessman after opening the successful Mercer Locker Room in Dover Plaza in the mid-1970s. He helped outfit and provide equipment for countless athletic teams in Mercer, while also providing his opinion in the store's "Coaches Corner."

"He used to hold court there, too," Johnson said. "I'd go in with my son Jonathan, and he'd be on the bench in the back holding court with his father (Ang). My son said, 'Dad, you know what, I can't remember any part of my life in baseball without Chuck being there.' All three of my boys played for him and my daughter was a scorekeeper."

Giambelluca made his name locally long before he began coaching. A 1961 Steinert grad, he played football, basketball and baseball for the Spartans and was eventually inducted into the school's first Athletic Hall of Fame class.

"He was four years ahead of me at Steinert but the names Chuck Giambelluca and Larry Migliaccio, they were the names you aspired to be," Giallella said. "You'd go down to watch a football or basketball game at Steinert, they were the guys you'd look at and say that one day you wanted to be that athlete you were watching on that field."

Fellow Steinert Hall of Famers from the 1960s weighed in when they heard the news.

"A great Spartan," said Gary Hohman, considered by many to be Steinert's greatest athlete.

"An athletic icon," noted basketball star Don Hess.

Giambelluca captained all three teams he played for but baseball was his main sport, and he went on to play in the Milwaukee Braves organization. When his playing career ended, Chuck took the reins of Broad Street Park in 1970 and over the next 35 years went 711-338 with five league championships and a 1975 state title.

His son Mike played for him from 1989-91, which was the only time Giambelluca managed an offspring.

"He started before I was even born, so it wasn't because of me," Mike Giambelluca said. "It's rare to find people like him today. All the volunteer service, 36 years of coaching. Most of the coaches today with

travel ball and everything, either you're coaching your own kid or you're getting paid. You don't find a lot of people who just do it because they want to help kids and not be compensated."

As a manager, Giambelluca combined gruffness with fairness and added a dash of his biting sense of humor.

"He was tough," Mike Giambelluca said. "He was more old school. Kind of in your face a little bit, but not a huge screamer. But he would get his point across."

Sitting in the other dugout, Freeman marveled at the way BSP came at his team.

"I always enjoyed competing against him," the current dean of Mercer legion coaches said. "His kids always played hard. His kids never took a day off and that shows what respect they had for him."

That attitude was instilled at the first practice session and maintained every day thereafter through the long, hot summers.

"He always had the teams prepared and ready to compete and give it our best shot," said Johnson, who played for the '75 state champs and coached under Giambelluca before replacing him as manager. "He always made the comment that no one's gonna push us around, we're gonna come out and play hard. We had quite a few teams with a lot of talent, but he was the guy that got us going and believed what we could do.

"He was also a guy that gave guys second chances. Guys that were maybe cast away from other teams, he brought them on. Players that didn't play high school ball because of differences with a coach, he'd have them on the ball club in the summer, they competed and played."

As a coach for both Ken and Rick Freeman, Giallella was on the front lines of innumerable BSP-Hamilton classics.

"We were the two powers back then so obviously the biggest rivals," Giallella said. "I got to coach against him for many years. You were rivals but you still became friends, whether you liked each other during the season or not."

It didn't matter what era, the Giambelluca handprint was there.

"I don't know if he ever knew how much of an impact he had on some of us from 16 to 18 years old," Costantino said. "I'm sure we all have our stories."

Petrowski added, "He encouraged us (as general manager) and made sure we played with an edge and made sure people knew they played for BSP. He left his mark on me and the baseball community forever."

Opponents who played against Giambelluca felt the same way, such as former Hightstown standout Ed Horowitz.

“One of the kindest people I came across,” the Hightstown High Hall of Famer said. “I have very vivid memories of him throughout my playing days and beyond.”

When he was inducted into the Steinert HOF, Giambelluca was introduced by long-time Spartan trainer/coach Ron “Sabo” Sebastiani, who went to Notre Dame High. His first words on the dais were “How the hell do they let a Notre Dame guy emcee a Steinert banquet?”

That was the kind of playful jab reserved for a close friend, which Sebastiani was. Which, in fact, everyone who commented on Giambelluca was. There are countless others who would also call him a close friend, and vice versa.

That’s rare, but that was Chuck.

“This is a real sad day in Mercer County sports,” said Sebastiani when he learned of the news. “There’s not a better guy who cared about athletes and family. I have a tear in my eye for a sportsman who I admired so much. His presence will truly be missed. He’s the best of the best!”

And for 77 years we were fortunate to hear the voice of the best, loud and clear and lovable.