

## ***The Brothers Maniaci: football greats Lodi History Highlights***

**Published online in August 2008**

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Throughout its history, the Borough of Lodi, New Jersey, has been known as a sports oriented community. Where young people are concerned, in the classroom and on the field of play, this ever expanding town spares no expense. Lodi's Recreation Department, run by Anna Belli and Al Perrelli, is heralded as among the finest in the state. The high school sports program continues to produce top ranked championship timber. Legendary coaches like Stan Piela, Tony Comeleo, Billy Masopust and Pat Tirico have kept up a winning tradition that dates back to 1938 when the Rams football team went undefeated, untied and unscored upon to win their first state championship.

Back in the 1930's Lodi, New Jersey was a veritable hotbed of sporting events. From bike races to tennis and everything in between. . . If you were a kid with a penchant for competition than this thriving Borough was the place to be. There were myriad clubs and organizations where a youngster could showcase his/her athletic prowess.

Every neighborhood boasted its own athletic club. A kid could run down to the corner store and return as a member of the latest baseball team. A bat in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other.

There were teams such as the Grove ACs, founded by Mr. Charles Nucifora, the Sons of Italy, the Lodi Eagles, the Jefferson ACs, the Lodi Red Wings. . . Wait there's more. . . The Woodside ACs, the Lodi Pleasure Club. . . Now that sounds inviting. . . The Lodi Pro's and from the heart of Main Street the White Sox Sporting Club. There were also semi-pro baseball teams like the Pirate ACs and the Zeps ACs. If pugilism was your sport of choice there was the Hamilton Sports Club.

The Lodi Net Men had the answer to that age old question "Tennis anyone?" Tennis in Lodi was big in the 30's. Obviously, by the name of the team "Net Men", there were no girls on the roster. Come to think of it there weren't too many opportunities for women in local sports back then. A player by the name of Matthew Lalumia won three consecutive borough championships. By 1934 a youngster was playing ball for good old Lodi High School. Actually the team name "Rams" wasn't chosen until November of 1935. The majority of the games took place at the Hilltop Oval on Woodside Avenue, the French Oval on Contant Avenue (Near DellGlenn) and at a large complex off of Garibaldi Avenue where now stands the Inspection Station.

In a baseball game at the Hilltop field Lodi High's star hurler, Dominick "Lefty" Brindisi, suffered a broken leg while sliding into second base. He went on to serve as a fighter pilot in WW II. Meanwhile, at the French Oval, a 14 year old kid by the name of Billy Nester, a shortstop for the White Sox Sporting Club, broke his leg by sliding into an exposed tree trunk enroute to third base. Poor Billy slid too early.

There was another team organized by Mr. Larry Toscano (future Historian) called the "Stove Pipes". In 1934 they played a team lead by a young doctor by the name of

Joseph Latona. His claim to fame was bringing me into the world in 1948. The team was called the Pinochle Aces.

N, I'm not making this up! The Stove Pipes went on to defeat the Pinochle Aces 9 to 4. The losers supplied the keg. Did they have Advil back in 1934? The next morning someone was heard groaning, "Is there a doctor in the house?" It was Doctor Latona.

The Town of Lodi held swim meets for school-age boys and girls, Yep, girls. Hey how do you think Esther Williams started? It was an Olympic size pool located off of Vreeland Avenue along the banks of the Saddle River. It was donated to the community by its owner Louis F. Tucci. The yearly events were organized by Lodi High School coach Mr. Stanley Piela.

You can't reminisce about Lodi sports in the 30's without mentioning the town's most celebrated young athletes, the brothers Maniaci, Sam and Joe. Two of the finest football players the Borough has ever produced with or without helmets. Sam played for Columbia while Joe scorched the landscape at Fordham. Both were stars at Hasbrouck Heights High School.

On February 10, 1935, the brothers Maniaci were honored for their achievements at a testimonial dinner held at the Columbus Hall on Nicholson Street. The affair was sponsored by a "local sportsman" by the name of Dick Glavin. In attendance was heavy weight boxer, Primo Carnera; from the world champion St. Louis Cardinals, Manager Frankie Frisch and star outfielder Joe Medwick; Yankee great, Russel Van Atta and Columbia football hero, Al Barabus. . . (No relation to the Barabus of biblical fame). Showing up late was "Mule" Haas of the Chicago White Sox. Also on hand were sports writers from an Italian newspaper called "Il Progresso".

Assisting Mr. Glavin were William Robol, Lawrence Toscano (Remember the Stove Pipes?), Stan Piela, Anthony Della Penta, George Gero, Robert Irwin, Buddy DaLeo, Vincent Focarino and Joseph Paci. Over 300 guests showed up to celebrate the grid iron glory of their heroes, the brothers Maniaci.

Now there's an interesting side bar to this story that cannot be overlooked. On Thanksgiving Day, 1935, Joe Maniaci lead his Fordham team to a 21 to 0 rout over NYU.

According to a 1935 Lodi Messenger clipping, team captain, Maniaci, fullback, played the best game of his illustrious career. After the game Maniaci revealed to the local media that prior to the game he and team mate Amerino Sarno were approached by, "Two flashily dressed fellows driving an expensive car." As the story goes the men offered the players \$1,000.00 to throw the game which, by the way, took place at Yankee Stadium in front of 80,000 fans.

The article read as follows, "Maniaci threw the long forward pass to Any Palou for the first two touchdowns, Sarno did the blocking for Jack Gallivan who scored the second."

As for the two "flashily dressed fellows" rumor had it that they sold the car for \$50.00

and went on relief. Way to go Joe!

During a recent phone conversation with the Director of Sports Information at Fordham University, Mr. Joe DiBari, it was learned that Joe Maniaci was the captain of the football team in 1935 and later became a fullback for the renowned Chicago Bears. Joe coached the football team at Brainbridge Naval Station leading them to the service championship in 1943 and 1944. He went on to become the head coach at St. Louis University. Maniaci was voted into the Fordham University Hall of Fame in 1976 and is a permanent member of the school's all time football roster. His coach at the time was James H. Crowley.

According to the Maniaci obituary, which was forwarded to the Lodi Library by Mr. DiBari, the grid phenom died on June 22, 1996, at 82 years of age.

Chicago Bears owner, George Halas, called Joe one of the best players in the history of the franchise. Nicknamed the "Maniac" Joe stills holds the club record for the highest average yards per carry in a single game; 11.8 On that day Maniaci rushed for 141 yards on 12 carries. It took place on October 2, 1939. Second on the list is the legedary Gale Sayers.

Joe was born in New York City on January 23, 1914. His family moved to 225 Union Street, Lodi, in the early 1920's. Both he and his brother, Sam, attended Hasbrouck Heights High School where they excelled in football, baseball, basketball and wrestling. According to the Windsor Star obituary, in Ontario, Canada, Joe took all state honors in each of the four sports.

It's unfortunate for the Borough of Lodi that their high school didn't open its doors until March of 1934. The brothers would surely have been inducted in the Lodi High School Hall of Fame.

During his stay at Fordham, the young grid star from Lodi, New Jersey, became the starting halfback for the College All Stars. In that game Joe and his teammates battled the Detroit Lions to a 7 to 7 stalemate in front of 102,000 frenzied fans. The game took place at Soldier Field in Chicago in 1936.

Joe's claim to fame in the pro rankings is the 1940 NFL title game against the Redskins of Washington. Maniaci carried the ball five times for 62 yards, caught a couple of passes for 44 yards and ran back two Sammy Baugh interceptions and scooted 42 long ones for paydirt. The Bears crushed Washington 73-0.

Joe's accolades include membership into the Italian Sports Hall of Fame. Other inductees are Vince Lombardi, Joe DiMaggio, Gene Saralen and Phil Esposito. . . Perhaps you've heard of them. During WW II Lieutenant Maniaci served in the U.S. Navy and again in Korea.

Joe went on to coach in the Continental League then at St. Louis University. He moved to Windsor, Ontario, Canada in 1967.

Quite an impressive resume from this Italian kid from Lodi. Borough residents, Charles Nucifora and Nick Nicosia, recall shagging golf balls for the brothers behind the Maniaci home on the corner of James Place and Union Street, Nick, who was 15 at the time used to retrieve the golf balls on Bell Avenue which is more than a couple of hundred yards away. As the crow flies. . . 15 minutes by car. No problem since Mr. Nicosia is still on the road. "They were celebrities in town," recalls Mr. Nucifora. "Wherever they went they were surrounded by admirers."

As for younger brother Sam, not much is known about him beyond his football career at Columbia University.

According to the school's sport historian, Mr. Bill Stienman, Sam was a player of impact who's on the field prowess helped lead the team to the 1936 Rose Bowl championship against Stanford University. Columbia wound up goose egging the heavily favored Stanford team by the unthinkable score of 7 to 0. Running back, Al Barabus, sprung lose by a key Maniaci block, sprinted 20 yards into pay dirt. The game remains, till this day, the biggest upset in college football history.

Sincerest thanks go out to Fordham University's Sports Information Director, Mr. Joe DiBari. Also to Columbia University Sports Historian, Mr. Bill Stienman. Without their help this story could not have been successfully completed.

Thanks also to the "Snooper". A gossip columnist for the Lodi Messenger in the mid 1930's. It was in his column that I was first introduced to those local heroes the brothers Maniaci. 73 years later. I'm here to say thank you "Snooper" wherever you are. The name of his column was "Town Chatter".

Of course special thanks go out to the brothers Maniaci - No guys, I didn't forget you after all!