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Pittsfield Football Hall of Fame

Making the right call

John Codey looks back at his career as an official

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PITTSFIELD

Some are born fortunate enough to enter the world with a silver spoon in their mouth. Then there are the John Codeys of the world, who come in with a whistle perched on their lips. Have you heard the expression whistle while you work? Well, meet Codey, who nowadays helps to mentor, assign and supervise Berkshire County high school football officials and who still spends his autumn Saturdays like he has for most of his life — at football games.

Codey is one of eight who are part of this year's Pittsfield Football Hall of Fame induction class. The list includes former St. Joe players Matt Keator, Brian Traversa, Paul Gregory and Larry McMahon, and former Pittsfield High standouts Jim Ditello and Matt Collins. Frank Ott of Taconic completes this year's class.

Joe Woitkoski, president of the Monday Morning Quarterbacks' Club, which oversees the local gridiron Hall, said that over \$32,000 was raised for scholarships this year. That figure, said Woitkoski, is a new record.



Codey, who still operates the game clock at University of Massachusetts home games, enjoyed a very active high school and college officiating career that began in 1964 and concluded in 1999. His son, Kevin, has taken the baton from his dad and is now a top-flight official in the Big East Conference at the tender age of 31.

A native of this city, Codey attended local parochial schools before enrolling at the former Cranwell School during his formative years. A three-sport standout, Codey graduated from Cranwell in 1961. To this day, he muses about what might have been. Convinced he would have attended Pittsfield High, Codey missed the chance to play with and be part of some of the most successful baseball and football teams in the school's history.

The Red Soldato and Ray Woitkowski-era at Pittsfield High arguably was the most prolific stretch of high-level success the school has ever known. Codey believes he would have fit in just fine with that crew, but learned long ago to move on.

Or at least try to.

"Yes, it's tugged at me a little over the years," he said.

Codey is part of this year's class being inducted into the Pittsfield Interscholastic Football Hall of Fame.



Few list football officiating as a career goal when they are in their teens. But like most passionate hobbies or vocations, people just seem to fall into them through a fateful moment in time or a twist of fate.

Codey, interested but not obsessed with the idea, attended some new officials' classes taught by local referee Pat Bruni. A former player, he was still very much interested in the game and its intricacies as he advanced into his early 20s.

At one point, he caught the eye of former St. Joe football player John Quinlan, who at that point was in the position that Codey is now — a football officiating guide and mentor. Quinlan stopped by the Union Federal Bank one afternoon, sought Codey out, and gave him a football rule book with the instructions to learn all he could.

Codey accepted the challenge, and the rest, as they say, is history.

"John was and is a great mentor," Codey said. "I still take great pride in the work I do with young officials."



The key to being a good official, Codey said, is to lock in on one of the five or six different assignments and to work continually on that position instead of jumping around from line judge to back judge. Also, Codey added, it's important to have a desire to excel and to want to advance to the next level.

In Codey's day, football officials could advance from high school to college games at the Division 2 or 3 level. The East Coast Athletic Conference was the traditional segue in which officials could advance during the 1960s and 70s. Codey had that passion and was able to take his game literally to the next level.

"If you're a good rules guy, then you can move up and become the referee, or lead official, for a crew," Codey said. "Other than that, you don't really want to be jumping around. You're better off evolving in a position you are comfortable with."

Codey primarily worked as a line judge over the years, taking his spot along the line of scrimmage opposite the chain gang.

"A good official doesn't even know the score," Codey said. "You just want to concentrate on your duties."

Codey then softened his stance.

"Well, you do know the situation. You are aware if someone is getting blown out or not."



Baseball managers and umpires have an open, and sometimes volatile, one-on-one, in-your-face relationship. Basketball, mostly because of the dimensions of the court, force a coach and game official to be, if not comfortable, at least familiar with each other.

Football, though, is a little more subtle. Not every official is near the coach, although line judges like Codey are, and the interaction over a 100-yard field between coaches and officials is less obvious.

Still, any officiating crew is going to deal with many coaching personalities. Some are welcome and some are just a bit more difficult to deal with. But the movement of the game up and down the field shortens the amount of time a coach and official might interact. And that's not a bad thing, Codey said.

"Some assignments you get, you just roll your eyes and know it's going to be a long day," Codey said. "Some coaches are real gentlemen."

Codey has done his fair share of Williams College games and said that former coach Bob Odell was great to work with. Former Williams College coach Dick Farley, said Codey, "was a bear on the sidelines during a game, but was one who would drop the issues once the game was over."

The side judge or line judge, Codey added, is in a favorable position — if that's indeed the term — to get more familiar with the coaching staff.

"You have to earn your stripes," Codey said. "You can tell the officials who have rabbit ears. What you want to do is to enforce the rules evenly for both teams."

Codey allowed himself a small laugh. He recalled one local high school coach who went speeding up the sideline to protest a call.

"The field was muddy and he slipped," Codey said. "He was sliding along the mud as he went by me, but he was still hollering about the call."

It's a funny up-and-down life, Codey admitted.

"One week you can't imagine things being any worse and the next week you have a cakewalk," he said.

Codey said it's best to let the coaches vent a bit during a game.

"As long as it's to our backs and no one's mother or wife is being brought up," he said. "It's different if you're going face-to-face and you start to get some spit on you. But you flag a coach rarely and eject them more rarely than that."

Codey did say he ejected a college coach on one occasion. The excited mentor actually came off the sidelines and made a tackle on a player heading for the end zone.

"We awarded the touchdown and ejected the coach," Codey said. "We did that on our own because there was nothing in the rule book covering that."



Fans of football know that on any television contest they get to watch the game two, three or four times. The world of instant replay has afforded fans that opportunity.

Officials, though, see the game from a much different perspective. Yes, they are closer.

"But we only get one look," Codey said. "And we get it at full speed."

Replays have helped, Codey admitted. "But there were many years where there was no camera in the sky and you had to make sure you were in position to see the play."

Still, each official has his own special area of the field to cover. Each official has different things to watch for. And even though the bottom line is to get it right, it's not that easy all the time.

"On most plays," Codey said, "a good official is probably not going to be where the ball always is and if he's doing his job, he may not be in a good position to see the play."

A back judge who is watching the receiver and defensive back jostle for position down the sidelines is unable to help on the play if it's a run. That's the point Codey is trying to make.



It's Codey's good fortune that his son Kevin has inherited the passion for football officiating.

Kevin, a basketball and baseball standout at Taconic High, fractured his skull in a fall as a child and never played football as a medical precaution. That turned out to be the real reason why the young man followed in his father's footsteps.

Confused? Actually the story is both understandable and easy to follow.

Because Kevin wasn't involved in youth football he had the chance to travel with dad on Saturday's to various football venues. It turned out to be quite a learning experience for Kevin, who sat in on rule discussions and pre-game meetings for almost two hours before kickoff.

"He was about 7 or 8 years old when he started traveling with me," John said. "In those days I'd let him be the ball boy. You would be surprised at how few good ball boys were available for games. You couldn't find one worth his salt. There are many responsibilities and it's not easy to find a kid who knows what he's doing. He'd do a good job and I'd pay him \$5 for his efforts.

"But, yes, the officials always meet a couple of hours before the game and go over rules and other things. Kevin would come to those meetings and just absorb it all."

Kevin, now 31, went up the ladder quickly. He was doing varsity high school games while still in his senior year at Taconic. He has been in the Big East the past four years and traveled as far as Indiana this year to be part of the Hoosiers' game with Connecticut.

Kevin did games at Rutgers and West Virginia this year, two teams that had time in the Top 25 polls.

It's serious, but not always.

"It was late in a Williams-Amherst game," Codey said. "It was about dusk and there was a collision between players on the field, and three of them went down and didn't get up. These doctors come running out of the stands — three of them — and let's just say that they've been tailgating since about 10 a.m. You know what I mean. They're standing around the players and telling me they're doctors. And I've got one of the coaches yelling at me to get them off the field.

"I looked at the coach and said to him 'I'll get them off the field when you get that team of lawyers forming at the end of the field out of the end zone.' "



Codey said the small college games are usually played at close quarters.

"I'm doing an Amherst game, and I was the back judge, so I had my back to the crowd in back of the end zone," he said. "I was being heckled pretty good, so I turned around quickly to take a peek. There's Dan Duquette and Mike Ryan giving me the business. I know them both well."

Both Amherst graduates, Duquette and Ryan have spent their careers in and around baseball.

Which led to the question: How does football officiating stack up against the other three major sports?

"I don't know much about hockey," Codey said. "But I have officiated baseball and basketball and I'd have to put football in the middle of those two. Basketball might be the toughest, it moves so fast and you might make 100 calls over the course of a game. In football, you might get two or three tough ones in the course of a game and maybe one that's a game-breaker.

"But basketball? Even with three officials I think it's hard to always get it right. Baseball, though, I find kind of easy."



Codey operates the clock at UMass games and is thankful for that opportunity. He said he didn't miss on-field officiating the first year he was out but did the second year. Now, he said, he's OK with his decision to be off the field.

In the meantime he continues to be to others what John Quinlan was to him so long ago — a guide and mentor.

"It's not easy," Codey said. "We work with that we have, but I know that if they get too good the colleges will want them. So, we're always working with new officials."

Kevin, who did a high school game this year when a busy Saturday forced John to go beyond the usual county roster of officials, was caught in a raucous crowd when Rutgers fans stormed the field after a big win earlier in the year.

John told Kevin that the strategy in that case is to let the crowd target the middle of the field and for Kevin to work toward the perimeter and circle around them to get off the field.

"Before the game you should plan your exit," John explained.

Still active in officiating at many levels, Codey has no plans to exit soon. That's a call that most would agree is the right one.