

Frank Januszewski, retired Oceanside High School basketball coach and Hall of Fame founder dies at 89

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ceanside High School basketball coach and Athletic Hall of Fame founder Frank Januszewski and his wife, Diane. “He always made me happy,” she said of her late husband.

COURTESY BONNIE YTUARTE





By Peter Belfiore (mailto:pbelfiore@liherald.com)

Frank Januszewski — a husband, father, retired basketball coach, mentor and friend — died on Sept. 16 of natural causes at South Nassau Communities Hospital. He was 89.

Januszewski, “Jan” to loved ones, “Coach Jan” to his players and “the big guy in the glasses” to everyone else, headed Oceanside High School’s basketball team for 14 seasons starting in 1956, and was the founder of the school’s Athletic Hall of Fame. He initially rose to prominence in the community for his early guidance of Art Heyman, who went on to play for Duke University and was the No. 1 pick in the 1963 NBA Draft.

But Januszewski was best known for his humor, compassion and heart, which was said to have matched his 6-foot-4-inch frame. “It’s a tremendous loss. He was such a cornerstone of the community for so long,” Richie Woods, 59, also a former OHS basketball coach, said of his longtime friend and mentor.

“Everyone believed in him when they played for him,” Woods added. “His players all swore by him, which is not typical for high school players ... They knew they had something special when they played for him.”

In 1960, Januszewski founded the Hall of Fame, a display of

memorabilia from prominent athletes who have passed through the school. He personally collected the wood-and-glass cases for the exhibit from local businesses, as well as the old photos and uniforms contained within them. “He wanted more than just a trophy room,” Woods said.

“He felt it was really important for people to know where they came from,” his oldest daughter Bonnie Ytuarte, 60, of Rockville Centre, explained. The display has since ballooned to occupy an entire hallway, and features an annual induction ceremony for new honorees.

During his tenure at OHS, Januszewski manned the microphone at school events, bringing his sense of energy and humor. “To hear him speak on the mic was a great treat for us,” Woods said.

The youngest of five children growing up in New Britain, CT, Januszewski never knew his father, who died when he was an infant. His mother was a factory worker, and his family often struggled financially.

As a coach, he was known for contacting athletic departments at universities around the country, begging

to have scholarships awarded to his players he knew didn't have enough money to attend college.

"He took a lot of people under his wing," said his youngest daughter, Jill Krol, 52, of Oceanside. "He was extremely, extremely generous."

To Januszewski, sports were not merely an arena for competition, but a way to build community and character. "What he loved about sports was the team," Krol said of her father. "It wasn't a means to an end. It was going to develop you as a person, as a human being in your community."

Januszewski spent much of his time outside coaching caring for the less fortunate, and would travel to New York City and poorer parts of Long Island with food and clothing. "He would always want you to have a warm coat and a piece of bread," Ytuarte said.

He served as a sergeant in the Marine Corps during World War II and the Korean War, and attended Springfield College in Massachusetts on the G.I. Bill, where he met his future wife, Diane DeSapio. She initiated their courtship by inviting him to the Sadie Hawkins dance.

"Let me ask this Jan guy," Diane decided after whittling down a list of possible candidates that she and her friends made before the event. He worked various jobs around the college, sweeping floors, mowing lawns and working as a night watchman, "so everyone knew Jan," she said.

The group of girls piled into the student shop he also manned and following a plan, they eventually left the two alone. When Diane emerged, "Of course, everyone was lined up with their ear to the door," she recalled.

She reported that Januszewski was unsure if he had a wedding to attend the night of the dance, but that he would let her know as soon as he found out. "He's not going to go," she said she remembered thinking.

But the same night, he called and said he would attend. "We had a wonderful courtship," she said. The two were married for 61 years. "He always made me happy," she said. "I can't remember a time when we were really angry with each other."

Diane later worked as a coach and gym teacher in the Baldwin and Lynbrook school districts. Athletics was at the core of their family. She, too, knew Jan as a jokester, noting, "He was a big tease, and he was always full of fun."

"Every day you wake up, it's Friday," she added. "We're gonna miss him so much."

Januszewski often touched the lives of his students. Phys. ed. and health teacher Tommy Jackson, who played for Januszewski from 1960 to 1961, said he credits his professional and personal successes to his former coach.

Spending his adolescent and teenage years in Oceanside, Jackson, 73, didn't have much money growing up. During his senior year, Januszewski asked him, "Tom, what are you going to be doing when you get out of school?" Jackson replied that he would likely try finding a career.

Januszewski suggested he go to college and study phys. ed. "Would you consider something like that?" he asked the 17-year-old.

“The man, my hero, drove me to Westchester, took care of business with the coach there, and got me set up,” Jackson said. He recalled the basketball coach at Westchester University, then Westchester State College, telling him, “If Coach Jan says you’re the kind of quality man who would be an asset for the team, that’s good enough for me. That was the kind of man he was.”

Jackson met his future wife at Westchester, and they would eventually adopt two children together. After graduating, Jackson spent 45 years as a health and phys. ed. instructor. “I think the world of Coach Jan because I wouldn’t have anything if it wasn’t for him,” he said. “He was such an influence. I was just so blessed.”

The two periodically kept in touch, and in 1998 Jackson took his son Jared, then 20, to meet Januszewski. “You know, your dad almost lost a game for me,” Januszewski jokingly told Jackson’s son over dinner.

Jackson recounted, “When we left, Jared looked me in the eyes and said, ‘Dad I see why you are the way you are.’”

“There’s no question where that man is,” Jackson said of his late mentor and friend. “And he’ll be telling some jokes up there.”

In addition to his wife and daughters Januszewski is survived by another daughter, Christine Pitchford, 56, of Easton, Md.; and his sons Jerry, 59, of Annapolis, Md., and Frank, 53, of Eatontown N.J. The family requests donations to Oceanside Community Service in lieu of flowers.
