



# Historically Speaking

With Town Historian  
Richard Forliano

## Mario “Jack” Vecciarelli: ‘As good as it gets’

*Fourth in a series of articles on  
the sporting legacy of the town*

Mario “Jack” Vecciarelli was more than one of the greatest and most famous athletes to emerge from the Village of Tuckahoe in the Town of Eastchester. He was a true representative of all that is finest about our community. “As good as it gets” were the words that his granddaughter Angela DeGatano used to describe him at his funeral. Jack passed away just short of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2003. This gentle giant was the third of five children who was born in 1913 and grew up on Columbus Avenue. His dad was born in Italy and came to Tuckahoe in 1902. He was a foreman in the building of the Kenisco Dam and married a local girl named Adela. They had five children.

Jack, as he liked to be called, attended the Main Street School in Tuckahoe. His family mentioned that there was friction back then between the Italians from the village in Tuckahoe and the Irish who lived up the hill in Eastchester. The Irish boys would intimidate the Italian youths from coming up the hill, but they never bothered Jack. He was stronger and more athletic than they were. To be blunt, they were simply scared of him.

Jack was probably the most famous boxer and one of the greatest athletes to ever come from this community. He had a legendary career at the newly built Eastchester High School. He captained the football and baseball teams for four years and also played basketball. In one of the first Thanksgiving Day football games between Eastchester and Tuckahoe, he won the game in the final seconds when Coach Jervis sent in a trick play.

Jack was playing halfback, and in the closing seconds with Eastchester behind, he started off on a running play. He stopped short and threw a long pass (one news account said 40 yards and another said 60 yards) to Artie

Cavazzi that won the game. Jack was the first Eastchester athlete to receive a full athletic scholarship. He played Big Ten football at Michigan State.

But his greatest athletic achievements took place in the ring. It is unclear when Jack started his boxing career. He could have possibly received some pointers from Milt Gibbons, who had started the Tuckahoe Police Associates in the village. In high school, he would get up early in the morning and run from his house to Kenisco Dam in Valhalla and back to train for Golden Gloves competition. He would come home, get dressed, go off to school, participate in practice in one of the three sports he played year round at Eastchester High School, and then go home and do homework.

In 1934 he won the Golden Glove Championship before he turned pro as a light heavyweight. By then, he was continuing his education at Manhattan College. He won 24 out of 25 matches by knockouts. He trained with the legendary Jimmy Braddock immortalized in the movie “Cinderella Man” under the supervision of Whitie Bimstein (played by Paul Giamatti in the movie). Unfortunately, a severed ligament in Jack’s right elbow ended his promising career.

But his greatest claim to fame happened after his athletic career was over. In 1939, he started the Oakridge Grill in Town Center where Mickey Spillane’s is today. But two years later, Pearl Harbor was attacked. Jack asked his dad to take over the business and tried to volunteer. But Jack was rejected by both the army and the navy as unfit for military service.

Then Jack did something he rarely did: He stretched the truth. He lied about his age and hid his injured elbow from the Marines. He



*Photo courtesy/Angela DeGatano, granddaughter of Jack Vecciarelli*  
**James Braddock, center, in front of Jack Vecciarelli, training for the upcoming fight. From the additional features in the extras on the special edition DVD “Cinderella Man” about the cast.**

served under MacArthur in the Pacific, hitting the murderous beachheads on the way to victory. His last stop was Okinawa. His friend and fellow staff sergeant, Jimmy Farrell, wrote to the local paper about the impact Jack, the old man on the unit, had on his men, “Never have I meet a truer friend... There are several men in our outfit who will never forget the heroic exploits he performed; many will be returning safely thanks to his unselfish courage... when the enemy had to be driven back, regardless of cost ‘Mario’ was always urging his men on and on.”

While in combat, Jack received a letter from a girl he never met from back home, Faye Venuti. This girl, five years his junior, wrote letters to ‘boys’ in each branch of the service. She promised that she would marry the first one to come home. Jack and Faye, short for Filomena, were married on June 1, 1946 and soon started a family. At times Faye would tease Jack and in a matter of fact fashion say, “Whatever happened to that army boy?” Jack never prided himself as a great athlete or war hero. He was first of foremost a family man and a fervent supporter of his community and church.

Religion was a big part of his life. He and Faye attended mass at both Assumption and Immaculate Conception churches every Sunday. He was a founder of the Dad’s Club

at Eastchester High School (the Sport’s Club today). He served a stint on the Eastchester Board of Education and served on the Recreation Commission when Lake Isle was purchased in 1979 (Both the daughters of Vince Bellew and Jack believe that their fathers would believe this to be their crowning achievement), and was the president of the first Little League in town. (*More about that in another article.*)

Recently, his daughter and granddaughter were asked at an interview what they remember most about Jack. The following is a paraphrased version of what they said:

“We feel so incredibly lucky to have him in our lives for so long. Family always came first. He loved us with all his heart and it was a big and strong heart. He gave us more love than anyone deserves. He came to all our ball games from Little League to high school to college. He was truly as good as it gets.”

Yes, Mario Jack Vecciarelli was as good as it gets, but he was not alone. When he and the other veterans returned home from the World War II they would give so much back to the community where they were born and raised.

*The next article will tell the story of how returning veterans started the first Little League in the town.*