



Historically Speaking

*With Town Historian
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Why greatness?

A fascinating question arose as this series, on the sports legacy of the town, was being researched and written. How could in less than half a century so small a population from the streets of Tuckahoe and Eastchester produce so many world class athletes? For the first 45 years of the 20th century, the population of the Village of Tuckahoe - and the town outside of Eastchester combined - never exceeded 12,000. Yet an incredible number of great competitors came from this community.

Boxing was one of the most popular sports in the world. Many of the great boxers of the 1930s emerged from the gym of Tuckahoe police officers Milt Gibbons and Charlie Marra. Between 1925 and 1931, four residents of the town won majors in golf. After World War II, a number of football All-Americans emerged from the streets of this town, and, in 1948, Washington Serini was named All-Pro for the Chicago Bears.

In the 1950s, Al Carapella from Tuckahoe was not only an All-American, but also played for the San Francisco 49ers, also achieving All-Pro status in 1954. Later, Eli Strand from Tuckahoe played for the Saints and Packers.

In 1956, the newly-formed Eastchester Little League sent a team to the World Series at Williamsport, Pa. In 1961, the Tuckahoe basketball team that Eli Strand played on was a small Class D school that went on to win the County Championship in the Open Division against schools 20 times their size.



Al Carapella was an All-American football star at the University of Miami, who also had offers to play professional baseball. He played professional football for the San Francisco 49ers for five years, achieving All-Pro status in 1954.

An answer to this fascinating question came from a recent “60 Minutes” segment on the inordinate number of Samoan football players who play Division I football and in the National Football League. American Samoa is a tiny, impoverished island in the South Pacific with a population of 65,000. Yet, there are at least 30 Samoans playing in the NFL and over 200 playing Division I collegiate football.

A high school football player in Samoa is 56 times more likely to play football on the collegiate level than his American counterpart. The governor of American Samoa, Togiola Tulafano, in the “60 Minutes” special was asked why. It was not their size – there are plenty of American football players who have access to weight rooms, personal trainers, and healthy diet who can’t compete with Samoans. His answer to the question of their football success comes down to “the farming culture values of hard work, reverence, and discipline.”

The values of hard work, reverence, and discipline are also the qualities that produced the great athletes from the streets of Eastchester and Tuckahoe. Our community, unlike American Samoa, was not a farming culture. The people in the “town outside” and even more so the Village of Tuckahoe were working class people who knew they had to work hard for everything they had. Nothing came easy. Anyone who has ever achieved success in the ring, on the gridiron or the links knows that there are no shortcuts to success.

The training habits of Jack Veccarelli are a perfect example of the value of hard work. Jack almost became the light heavyweight champion of the world and was a sparring partner of the great James Braddock. He would get up every morning, run to the Kenisco Dam and back to his home in Tuckahoe. Then he would shower, dress, and go off to Eastchester High School. After school, he played three varsity sports. He would then come home and do his homework. He was the first athlete from the town to receive an athletic scholarship. Jack was the first of many to receive honors both on the gridiron and in the ring.

On the links, Johnny Farrell and Tom Creavy, both caddies at the Oakridge Golf Club, with great natural talent and hard work, won the U.S. Open in 1928 and the PGA in 1931, respectively. The multitude of football players who became collegiate All-Americans, some of whom went on to play in the NFL and two of whom achieved All-Pro status, all knew the value of hard work.

But reverence and discipline are also essential. Time and time again in formal and informal interviews of old timers in this town, the message stands out. These people, like the farmers of Samoa, treasure their faith, their families, their teachers, their community, and their country.

It is no coincidence that this small town had perhaps the largest number of families that lost their children in World War II.

Citizens did not question people in authority because there was a faith, and there still is a faith that people in authority would do the right thing. The vast majority of the people in the Eastchester and Tuckahoe community believed that their parents, their teachers, their religious leaders, their elected officials, and people who participated in service and civic organizations had their best interests at heart. Athletes did not question their coaches and were successful because they listened to them and obeyed their direction without question.

This is the ninth in a series of articles on the sports legacy of the town. In the next and last article, the story of some of the great football players after World War II will be given and more will be added on the characteristics of our community that created greatness, not only in sports, but in life. “Historically Speaking” runs biweekly.