Joseph J. Fontana helped build Southington sports

**The architect**

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By JOHN GORALSKI

**Sports Writer**

Joseph Jay Fontana was a fundamentalist, a perfectionist, and a drill sergeant. He knew what he wanted to accomplish, and he wouldn’t settle for anything less. Fontana liked to run off-tackle. So when the sun was setting at the end of practice, Fontana would line his players up at the three-yard line and run off tackle as long as it took to get it right.

“Everybody in the state knew that we ran off-tackle for the extra point. They would pile 11 guys there, and it didn’t make any difference,” said his nephew John Fontana who still cringes when he thinks about those practices. “One day we ran that extra point 47 consecutive times at the end of practice. Forty-seven times! He would sit there and say, ‘Do it again.’ Everybody knew it was coming. He wanted everybody laying on the ground at the end. You blocked. You ran, and you got those points all the time.”

Few coaches were as successful as Fontana, and it came down to preparation. From 1932-1954, he collected 139 victories on the gridiron with just 38 losses and 14 ties. Southington collected four undefeated seasons and finished nine more seasons with just one loss. Teams knew what was coming, but they just couldn’t stop it.

“If you ask guys that went back, they’d probably tell you that my uncle was the best football coach in the state…ever,” said John. “Some people like this town. Some people love it, but he had a passion for it.”

**Coach**

Former Southington Athletic Director Joseph J. Fontana, left, stands with Blue Knight coach Walter Lozowski.

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John Fontana, Nephew

**AD**’s nephew said. “Back then, you’d hope that your athletic knowledge was enough so that you’d be a good AD. He stood alone.”

Dom D’Angelo, a former player under Fontana and a successor as coach and athletic director, credits his mentor for his own success.

“He had a determination that you just can surpass,” D’Angelo said. “He just loved the game. He was a great athlete, himself, when he played. He had such a love and desire that he just drove people that wanted to emulate him.”

Gil Varjas, a member of the Southington High School baseball hall of fame and a storied coach at New London, said that the thing he remembers most was the first day of baseball practice when the team would gather at the edge of the field like a group of eager toddlers at daybreak on Christmas morning.

“They huddle in a group at the edge of the field and wait for the unmistakable sounds of Santa Claus swooping in on his sled. They were waiting for Fontana to make his annual appearance.”

For his nephew, it was the start of a storied coaching career. For the Athletic Director uncle, it was just another opportunity to mentor an up-and-coming coach.

“Nowadays, you go through courses to be an AD,” his nephew said. “Back then, you’d hope that your athletic knowledge was enough so that you’d be a good AD. He stood alone.”

Fontana’s reputation drew coaches like Bob Witnebben to town. In the early 70s, Southington was interested in starting a wrestling program, so they turned to Witnebben to get them started. He remembered being the start-up coach surrounded by the established programs, but he never treated that way by Fontana.

“He hired me and wanted me to build the program. He told me that whatever I needed, he’d get and he did,” Witnebben said. “If I needed a new mat, or I needed a place to practice, or I wanted to go someplace, he’d figure out a way for me to do it. We traveled a lot around the state—to Stamford and Hartford and Simsbury—We went to the places we needed to wrestle, and he never said that he wouldn’t pay for anything. He was terrific.”

Teams flourished, and the town continued to grow.

Southington became a leader in sports throughout the state in both sports and in women’s sports. When it came time to christen the new sports fields at the current high school, town officials never hesitated. It’s not just the football field that carries his name. It’s the pathways, the practice fields, and the fence that runs around it. It was the house that Fontana built, and Joseph J. Fontana complex was dedicated in 1975.

Now, Fontana is one of four coaches to represent the town in the first class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, he will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville. For tickets, contact Jim Vergeau, (800) 626-7335.

“He set standards that are really tough to follow,” said John. “I think it would have been important to him because this was his town.”

“Many coaches have come here just to talk to him. He was always doing diagrams with them. I played for him, and he was an exceptional, exceptional coach.”

At the time, most teams ran some version of the single-wing, and they pounded the ball off-tackle or up the middle. Fontana searched for any way to break the edge. He designed a play called the ‘Buck Lateral’ which used misdirection by the fullback, a couple of pitches, and an unexpected pass down the field.

College coaches began to implement the package, and it began to spread. “He designed all of those plays,” said the younger Fontana. “They were all his, and they went national. College coaches used to use them. He was such an innovator off the single wing. All of that was designed here, and college coaches would take it and use it.”

Why, then, did he stay in a town that many people have ever had,” John said. “Some people like this town. Some people love it, but he had a passion for it.”

**Hall of Fame**

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

**Inside the Numbers**

Overall coaching record: 329-61-14

- Football (1932-1954)
  - Overall Record: 139-38-14
  - 4 undefeated teams
  - 9 seasons with one loss

- Baseball (1932-1961)
  - Overall Record: 190-23
  - 9 conference titles
  - 1 state title (1961)
  - 4 runners-up
  - 1 undefeated season (1961)

That was such a big deal at the time,” said Varjas. “He was a great guy. He had good teams, and we always had everything we wanted.”

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Southington HS Athletic Complex named as ‘Joseph J. Fontana Complex’ (1975)