Mike Lantiere has been the man behind the scenes

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A few years ago, a hard-hatted baseball fan who had wandered through the Southington infield and hit a can of soda player in the face like a bullet at point-blank range. Blue Knight assistant coach Mike Lantiere, a denizen by day, sprung onto the field and steadied the boy as he fell to the ground.

The player looked up at Lantiere and asked about the damage. "Coach, will I be okay," he asked as blood dripped from his chin. "I have the prom tomorrow night."

"I felt so bad for him," said Lantiere. "I've seen a couple accidents. Sure, we've had to do some emergency stuff. It's scary, but who else is going to do it? You've got to come through."

When it comes to coming through, nobody has done it better Dr. Michael Lantiere. For more than 20 years, he's wandered the sidelines anonymously. Unpaid, unknown, and unheralded, Lantiere seems almost too good to be true. Few have contributed behind the scenes as much as the good doctor.

"If you talk about boosters, you're talking about somebody who doesn't care for anything in return," said former Blue Knight baseball coach John Fontana. "That's Mike Lantiere. He has definitely gone beyond the call of duty. He didn't get one dime for being an assistant coach. Not only was he the assistant coach, he had to shut down his office to do it. He actually lost money. It's incredible."

Fontana first turned to Lantiere in 1983 to help upgrade the school's facilities. Lantiere rolled up his sleeves and jumped on for the ride. He was responsible for lighting the varsity field. He was in charge of the early sprinkler system. He raised money, petitioned the local committees, and managed the vendors. When it came to the lights on the baseball field, Lantiere donated about $5,000 of his own money to purchase one of the lamps.

"We did it specifically so that parents could get out there—the ones that couldn't get there during the day—to watch their kids play," he said. "At the time, there were very few high school fields with lights. "Ever since we've had those lights up, it's been great. We play about six or seven night games, and I'm happy we did it."

His volunteering didn't end when his children graduated. His son left for college in 1988, but Fontana turned to Lantiere once again. Fontana needed someone at third base, and Lantiere jumped at the chance. The rest was history.

"He played ball, so it wasn't like he just wanted to give his time like a lot of parents do through Little League," said Fontana. "I trusted him at third base. It was just like me being over there. We knew each other's thoughts, and it made it a lot easier."

Impressed of one of his players so much that, when Steve Matyczky inherited the team after Fontana's retirement, the former Blue Knight player kept Lantiere on the sidelines. Matyczky said it was crucial to his early success.

"We had been working with kids for a ton of years, so he was a great sounding board when I was a young coach," Matyczky said. "I threw things at him and to this day he'll call me or see me at practice and say, 'Let's do this, or let's do that.' He has a great insight, and you need that other person. It's easy to get down when you should be doing if the team's clicking or not clicking. He's given me the team such good information and good guidance." Matyczky said that his commitment to Southington baseball isn't limited to the Knights. He coached his son's teams at Southington Western Little League and stayed on as league president once his son moved on to the high school team. Lantiere advanced to the district level and began to umpire games. He's spent countless hours on the diamond.

"I love baseball whether it's the Little League or the high school or softball. It's my game and it's my escape from drilling teeth. It's really my way out," he said. "When I come home, my blood pressure's down about 15 points. I might be sorry if we lost a game, but it's not always going to be. You know?"

Lantiere said that his family has been very supportive when it comes to the hours spent on his passions. "One day my wife was asked how she could have me out all the time playing baseball, and she really shocked me," he said. "She doesn't say much, but she said that most women that have to work and find their husbands have to go to a bar. All she has to do is find a baseball field."

"To this day, he's committed to Little League as an umpire in chief of the Eastern Region. He oversees the organization's officials from Maine to Maryland. In 1995 Lantiere got his chance to umpire at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, PA, and he still contribute to the event as a replay official. He earned the Little League's President's Award for his years of continued service. "You have to take into consideration what he's done outside of the town, too, with the Little League. He's done work state-wide, at the national level, and at the world level," said Matyczky. "His commitment to the youth of Southington is fantastic, but he also goes out to neighboring towns. He impacts everyone with the Little League World Series." That's why officials selected Lantiere as the first booster volunteer to be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. With his commitment to the varsity level, the youth level, and the national level, it was an easy decision.

"Most people would do a little here or there, but I don't think there's anybody who's done as much and for as long a period of time as he's done," said Fontana. "For 15 or 16 years, he came south with me to Florida, and our records were incredible because of the job he did. Then, when it came to fundraising, he was always at the top. It just amazes me what he did for nothing."

Lantiere will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf on Wednesday, Nov. 10. Lantiere credits the kids. "It's the kids. The athletes are still the ones that make it fun. I always say at the end of every season that this is going to be my last year, but somebody who's a sophomore or a junior comes up to me and asks me to stay," he said. "I don't see an end to it, so I'm not looking forward to retirement. As long as Steve wants me there, I'll be there."

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