

Hall of Fame

He was 'the Bull'

Pat "Corky" Cassella proved that good things come in small packages

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

The ground above him exploded into a shower of stone, dirt, and asphalt. The avalanche spilled into the sewer excavation, pinning Pat 'Corky' Cassella under a half ton of rubble in the summer before his senior season. The 5 foot, 7 inch halfback clawed his way through the debris but was rushed to the hospital for x-rays and treatment.

Newspapers splashed headlines about the fallen Knight. Southington sports fans held their breath, and doctors studied the test results. Everyone was worried about Corky, but Cassella was

Hall of Fame

worried about his team.

"Corky's first question on his arrival at the hospital was, 'Will it hurt my football playing,' doctors told the press in 1955. There were no breaks, just an ankle sprain and back bruise. The 180-pound back would be ready to play on opening day.

Opposing defenses tried and failed to take him out of the game. Teammates battled against him in practice, and an avalanche of dirt couldn't even slow him down. Perhaps that's why the late Southington coach Joseph Fontana nicknamed Cassella 'The Bull,' and called him "one of the best fullbacks I ever coached" when he stepped down from coaching after Cassella's junior year.

When Coach Walt Lozoski held the first gridiron practice in 1955, the Knights had just 23 hopefuls at the opening practice. There were just six returning players from Fontana's undefeated state championship team, but that didn't frustrate Southington's new head coach. Lozoski had Corky, and that would be enough.

"Corky is quite a boy," Lozoski told the early season press. "All he thinks about is sports, especially football. You won't find a harder worker on the practice field than Cassella. He'll be out there every minute right up front leading the team in conditioning, etc. That's the kind of ball player he is."

It was no surprise to teammates when Cassella burst onto the scene as a junior with eight touchdowns and five extra point conversions. They expected it at the start of his senior season, and he came through with eight more scores and three more extra points. They knew he deserved the accolades—all-conference, all-state, and all-American. After all, Cassella was literally recruited to play for the Knights.

As a freshman, he followed his brother to Wilcox Tech in Meriden.

"I went to Wilcox because my brother was a basketball player,



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

•Voted 'Most Athletic' by the Class of 1956.

Football

- Captain (1955).
- All-State (1955).
- All-American honorable mention (1955).
- Invited to play in the high school All-American Football Bowl (1955).
- Player of the Week on October 8, 1955.
- Awarded the Jones Jewelers trophy as the outstanding Blue Knight on Thanksgiving (1955).
- 1954—8 touchdowns (5 rushing, 3 receiving), 5 extra point conversions, 47 points.
- 1955—8 touchdowns (8 rushing, 0 receiving), 2 extra point conversions, 44 points.

Basketball

- Won Central Valley League titles (1954, 56).
- Starting Guard for Wilcox Tech (1953).
- Starting Guard for Southington High School (1954, 55, 56).

Baseball

- Captain (1956).
- Won Central Valley League titles (1954, 55, 56).
- Starting short stop for Wilcox Tech (1953).
- Third baseman for SHS (1954, 1955, 1956).
- State runner-up (1955).

“

You just didn't want to be on the other team from him.

He was a great competitor to the extreme, and he wouldn't give an inch.

”

Ed Nardi,
former SHS basketball player

but I had my friends that played football, and they were the ones that talked me into coming back to Southington," he said. "They needed a halfback, they said, on the football team, so they talked me into coming back to Southington High School."

Cassella made the most of the opportunity. He threw himself into three sports—football, basketball, and baseball. Despite his size, he clawed his way onto the varsity roster in all three seasons. Despite his youth, he battled his way into each starting lineup. Despite opponents' efforts, he powered the offense or anchored the defense every time he stepped into the action.

"He was a great competitor, and he was tough," said Blue Knight assistant football coach Joe Orsene.

"You just didn't want to be on the other team from him," said Ed Nardi, a teammate on the basket-

ball court. "He was a great competitor to the extreme, and he wouldn't give an inch."

"If the coach told him to go through that brick wall, he'd lower his head and do it," said Andy Meade, a teammate on the football field. "He just put his heart and soul into every game."

Ray Thorpe, an upperclassman, turned to Cassella as an equal. "He may have been a short guy, but he had the heart of a fire plug," he said. "He more than made up for his size with his tenacity."

Cassella said that playing hard was all he ever knew. He grew up on Bristol Street, competing against powerhouse neighborhoods in pick-up games, battling the big kids on the streets, back-fields, and gyms. If Cassella wanted a chance to play, he had to earn it. And that's what he did.

"I always played with the older kids because I used to go



1956 CHRONICLE COURTESY SOUTHINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

In the mid-50s Pat "Corky" Cassella might have been only 5'7" and 180 pounds, but he was unstoppable in all three seasons.

down to the YMCA," he said. "You would sit on the sidelines, and they would have pick-up teams. My brother played. Ray Michancyk played, and they were all older and ahead of me. I used to wait and wait until they were short a player. They'd put me in as the fifth player, and I'd always have to play against those older kids."

But 'Corky' would never shrink from the challenge, and he carried that momentum into his high school career. He was a leading scorer for Wilcox Tech's basketball team as a freshman, and that spilled into his sophomore year at Southington. With one year of varsity experience at Wilcox, coaches took a chance on Cassella as a sophomore where he quarterbacked the attack.

"Nardi and [Dick] Lorenzo were the scorers," he said with a laugh. "I used to joke with them that I'd give them the ball, and I would never see it again—especially Lorenzo. He was an excellent shooter. Walt [Lozoski] wanted me to control the game, and that's what I tried to do."

He wasn't asked to be a scorer, but that wasn't a problem. Cassella became the play maker on both sides of the court.

"Coach Lozoski always put him on the other team's high scorer, and he would play such a tough defense," said Nardi. "Corky was a great defensive player and an assist man. He wasn't a great scorer, but anytime there was somebody on the other team that could score, Coach would put him on that guy."

Cassella's basketball teams rallied for two league titles. As a

three-year infielder, his baseball teams rallied for a trio of conference trophies and a postseason run that ended with a second place finish in the state tournament.

But it was football where Cassella really captured the spotlight. He dominated both sides of the ball, helped lead the Knights to a state title as a junior, and carried a rebuilding team to a 5-2 record as a senior.

In the waning minutes of their first contest his senior year, Southington was clinging to a six-point lead over Woodrow Wilson when Cassella grabbed the ball and held it.

"On the first play of the game Woodrow Wilson went and scored, so they were ahead of us from the first play of the game. After that, we settled down and beat them in a close game," said Orsene. "At the end, Corky was running the clock out because there was so little time. He got the snap, and he was running back and forth all over the field trying to kill the clock."

He did, and the Knights won. When it came to effort, nobody gave more than Cassella. That's why members of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose Cassella for the Class of 2011. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, he will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"It's quite an honor," he said. "I wanted to live up to our tradition. That's what the people in Southington expected from us, I think. They wanted a winning team, and that was it."