

The Scarsdale Inquirer

Founded in 1901

VOLUME 90, NUMBER 46

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2012

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION



SCARSDALE INQUIRER/JIM MACLEAN

Jim-nasium

Edgemont's old gym getting upgrade in San Marco's honor

By TODD SLISS

It wasn't until the late 1980s when the administration realized that Edgemont Junior/Senior High School had finally outgrown the school's lone gymnasium. When 1963 Edgemont graduate Jim San Marco was hired as

athletic director in 1988, after serving as a physical education teacher since 1968, his mission was to see the project of a new gymnasium, the Pantherdome, to fruition. Having played and coached in the old gym, San Marco had a strong connection to both facilities.

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However, that old gym holds the memories of his youth and part of his coaching career, which makes it all the more fitting that as of Dec. 14, the old gym will be dedicated in his honor and renamed the Jim San Marco Gymnasium. In addition, the gym, built in 1957 when the school was founded, will undergo a makeover.

With over \$200,000 in donations made by alumni already, John A. Griffin, a 1981 Edgemont graduate who played soccer under San Marco and later at the University of Virginia, will match an additional \$100,000 worth of donations made to the Edgemont School Foundation in San Marco's name. That could double the total amount to over \$400,000.

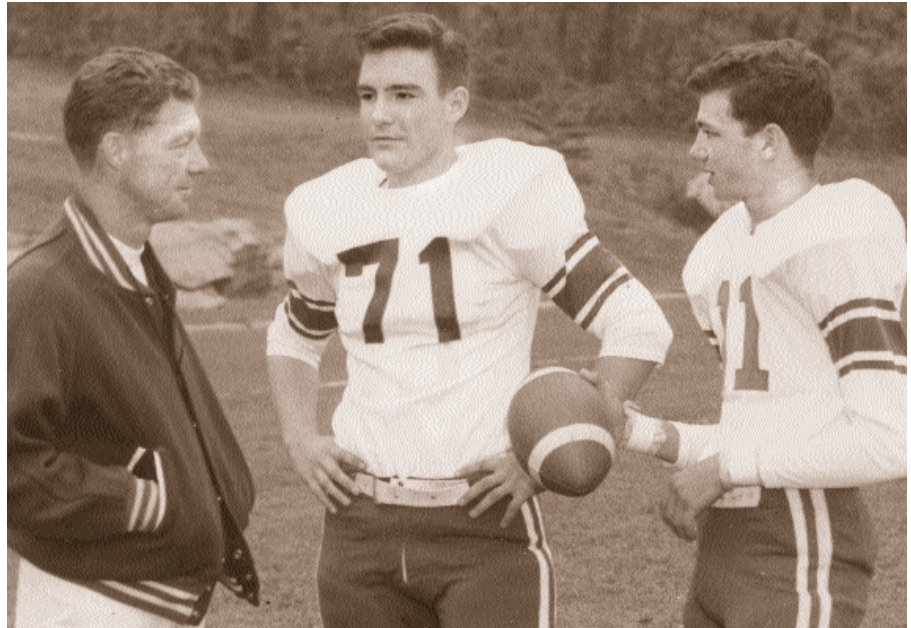
Griffin had two requests: 1) a large part of the funds be used for the physical education/athletic departments and 2) San Marco be honored for his 44 years of professional service in Edgemont.

Andrew Falk, the ESF co-chairman, has been working closely with foundation board members, superintendent Nancy Taddiken and athletic director Ray Pappalardi to see the wishes of Griffin and others fulfilled. When San Marco was presented with the idea of naming the old gym after him, his first reaction was typical of the modest man — “No... way!” After hearing more, San Marco finally gave in for one reason: he knew that it would benefit the kids of Edgemont for decades to come.

“I said that if it was going to help kids out that I'd go along with it,” San Marco said. “I think I got that from Dave Kintzing. Dave didn't want any of that stuff. When he retired we didn't know anything about it. He took the whole staff and said, ‘I just retired. You can't do anything to change my mind. I don't want a party. I don't want anything.’ He was a very modest, unassuming guy.”

Of course San Marco later named the annual varsity basketball tournament in Kintzing's honor, so perhaps he's getting a taste of his own medicine.

“When someone does something good I want to do something for them,” San Marco said. “I have no problem doing



Jim San Marco, right, and coach and mentor Art Mann left, during the early 1960s.

that. But when it's the other way around ...” He noted that they had to make sure that when he retired as athletic director in 2004 he would actually show up for the party they were throwing for him.

San Marco will be honored and the old gym dedicated on Friday, Dec. 14, at 7:30 p.m. between games of the annual Dave Kintzing Basketball Tournament.

“I played for him right in this gym,” San Marco said. “This is where I coached, in this gym. Boy, am I blessed to have had the opportunity to not only work with so many great kids, but great people, too.”

At Edgemont, the field at the track is named after Charles “Doc” Blanford, there are two gardens named after former teachers at the junior-senior high school and the multipurpose room at Seely Place is named after former superintendent Alden Larsen, who hired San Marco, so these dedications are certainly nothing new. And while they are rare, the San Marco naming is a slam dunk, a no-brainer.

“I'm delighted that Jimmy is being recognized,” Taddiken said. “He's given so much for so long. He's an Edge-

mont graduate and it's great to see him be successful, that he's given so much in the environment that he started out in as a student.”

The irony is that neither Griffin nor San Marco are looking for any type of recognition, but as they did when Griffin was student and San Marco coach, they are teaming up to work hard for others, the current and future students at the school.

“I know it's big and I know who it's from, but he's not looking for recognition,” Taddiken said. “He's looking to recognize a coach who meant the world to him at Edgemont. Jim can enjoy this. He doesn't look for recognition for himself, but it's nice that people can recognize someone who has given so much to other people. Dec. 14 is a chance for others to say thank you and also make donations.”

In addition to honoring San Marco, ESF will reach out to alumni really for the first time since the foundation was formed in 1993 in response to a failed budget. Up to this point most of the donations to ESF came from community members whose kids were still in school and empty-nesters who still saw

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the value of the district. This is a chance to reach out to more alumni, and build a database for an alumni directory.

There is a website, www.coachsanmarcocontribute.com, where community members can learn more about San Marco and the project, but also leave a message for him. Taddiken's message not only thanked San Marco for his unending service to Edgemont, but also his wife, Lesley, and his two daughters, Mary and Jill, for the sacrifices they made as San Marco spent his days, evenings and weekends with the Panthers. "He missed a lot of family stuff," Taddiken said. "The job of an A.D. is time consuming and challenging. As his stationery used to state, he was always the best he could be."

Griffin posted: "Jim San Marco had a profound influence on my life. Other than my parents, Jim was the first adult to take a sincere interest in me as a person. He challenged me to become a better teammate, a better friend and a better citizen of the Edgemont community. He also taught me Japanese. Coach San Marco loved to use the Japanese word 'Wa,' which means togetherness, or team spirit. We all felt so enlightened running around the Edgemont soccer field yelling, 'We gotta have Wa!'"

"Jim's emphasis was always on character development. He taught me not only how to lose with dignity, but how to win with humility. He was universally respected among his players and his peers. Sometimes I was a little scared of Jim, and this was a good thing. No one wanted to let Jim San Marco down and in that way he brought all of us to new heights."

Pappalardi has been assessing the gym in order to make the best use of the space. In addition to physical education classes, the gym is used for modified volleyball in the fall and wrestling and gymnastics in the winter after school. The space of the physical structure will not change, but things within the room can, such as potentially eliminating some bleachers to accommodate teaching stations.

"We've been as versatile as we can with the partition, but it's pretty much set up to play basketball," Pappalardi

said. "You can't pull the nets out of the way. To be able to make that a space we can convert for multiple purposes would be fantastic. If we could set up stations that would help develop physical fitness and skills related to sports, would be a much more ideal use for the space."

In addition, upgrades are planned for the team room, with technology a priority.

"We don't know enough yet, but I think it's a great thing to honor Jim," Pappalardi said. "He's given his life to this place. He went to school here, he was an athlete here, teacher, coach. I think it's about time we recognize what he's done."

San Marco was asked for his input on the project and noted that he did want the renovation and modernization to benefit as many students as possible.

"We're several months away from a plan, but it's at least getting a facelift, new floors and possible various equipment to make it contemporary and state of the art," Falk said. "Also a portion will renovate the team meeting room and put more technology built into it. The balance of the pledge or the majority will go into the foundation's endowment to fund various initiatives for the school."

The Edgemont School Foundation is one of the most important resources helping the district overcome budget constraints, though mostly in the areas of technology and infrastructure needs.

"They've been very generous in funding programs and updating buildings that we would not have been able to afford and now with the 2 percent property tax cap that we can't go above each year it's a real handicap for us," Taddiken said. "It's the generosity of people and the foundation's motto 'To enhance and ensure an Edgemont education.'"

Athletics typically has its own help from Edgemont Rec and the E Club, but this time around the money will go to benefit all students since everyone is required to take physical education.

"I think this accomplishes two things," Falk said. "It fulfills the donors' wishes to have San Marco honored in an appropriate way, and it's within our mission. It fills a crucial need and we're really helping every student because every kid takes P.E. That really has an impact."

Life of Jim

No one has had more of an impact on more Edgemont students than San Marco. In 1947, the San Marcos moved to Edgemont when Jim was just 2 years old. He graduated from Edgemont High School in 1963, and returned to teach and coach there in 1968 after graduating from Ithaca College. From 1988-2004, San Marco served as athletic director and coach, and from 2004-11 as a tennis coach. This is the first school year that he has not been officially involved with the program at Edgemont since 1968, but that doesn't mean he isn't around and available to any students, school staff or community members.

Even as a high school athlete — he was quarterback of the football team as a confident sophomore and led Edgemont to its first winning season, a 4-3 record — San Marco was a legend at the school. He knew he was destined for a life of education and athletics, his two passions. After his first year of college he switched to a business major, but quickly realized that it wasn't for him and returned to his original plan, a career path that he valued above money or prestige. Ironically the prestige came and the contributions he made working with kids, like George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life," have made him the "richest man in Edgemont."

San Marco's memories of the soon-to-be renamed gym are plentiful, and if you have a few days he will tell you about some of them, complete with the names of everyone involved.

"I think my first memory is of practicing in the gym on a Saturday when playing sixth-grade rec basketball," San Marco said. "In those days, rec basketball went from sixth to eighth grade and baseball from fifth to eighth grade. Those were the only sports offered and Edgemont dads coached the teams. We played about seven or eight games during the season. Beginning in ninth grade, we tried out for the JV and varsity teams. Modified teams did not exist."

As a player, San Marco helped the basketball team win its first league title in that very gym as a senior in 1962-63.

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"My mentality was that I wasn't afraid of failing," San Marco said. "You can't live in the past. You can't forget about it. You learn by it. You win or you learn." (That last sentence is one of his famous San Marco-isms. One time a player told him, "We're not going to learn anything today, Coach.")

During San Marco's coaching days, Bruce Lefkowitz broke the single game county scoring record during a night affair at home. He needed to score 52 points, which he could have done on any given day, but in this game against Alexander Hamilton it turned out he needed to in order for the team to win. He scored 50 and was fouled late in the game, hitting both shots. In another game Lefkowitz fouled out and it was up to the rest of the team to lead Edgemont to victory. The Panthers stepped up and got the job done with a buzzer-beater.

"Not just the games or the scores — a lot of those I don't remember — but I just remember playing here in high school and this was the only game in town," San Marco said. "In those days there were like seven sports, all male sports. Everyone would be piled on here, in the corner, under the basket. It was completely packed, a wild thing. Football we had great support as well. This is a special place here."

San Marco would do whatever he could to give his teams an edge. He would find out what type of basketball an opposing team used and make sure to put it in the budget to get two or three types of balls to prepare for road games.

He also took great pride in watching former teacher and coach Cindy Moeller put on the dance and gymnastics show in the old gym before it was moved to the Pantherdome to accommodate larger crowds. Growing up there were the Teenarena nights when half the gym was used for a sock hop, the other half for games and ping pong. "It was a great healthy environment and we all had a lot of fun," San Marco said.

San Marco, the oldest of five, had two brothers and two sisters, whom he instructed in sports. His first real coaching assignment came when he was a junior

at Edgemont. He was asked to coach an eighth-grade basketball team. He was on the way to becoming a successful coach in terms of wins and losses with boys' soccer, boys' basketball and girls' tennis and boys' tennis, but also working with kids and getting the best out of them. He learned a lot from his former coaches like Art Mann and Kintzing.

San Marco's coaching career ended after the fall of 2011 when he coached the girls' tennis team for the final time. Prior to the spring of 2012 he stepped down before the boys' tennis season and did not return to coach the girls this fall. He knew that as much as he enjoyed the athletes and the coaching that he couldn't put 100 percent into it. And if he couldn't do that, he was going to hand the reins over to coaches who could.

"That first year [with rec basketball] we finished undefeated, just as we did when coaching my last season with the girls' tennis team last year," San Marco said. "It was a great way to begin and end a coaching career. Of course there were a number of losses in between those two seasons and I think they made me a better coach. I have always said that when you lose a game you get immediate feedback about what you need to work on. Sometimes winning a game hides the mistakes you make as a team and coach and you may be unsure as to what you really need to work on to improve as a team."

When San Marco took over as athletic director in 1988 the program was a mess. He made having the right coaches and supporting teams by building up the E Club priorities. If nothing else, the athletes would have a fighting chance as compared to the football team being 0-8, baseball 0-17 and boys' basketball having only one win when he became A.D.

When hiring coaches the bottom line was, "Do I want this person coaching my two daughters? If I didn't want them coaching my two daughters I didn't hire them."

On the current roster of coaches are Edgemont graduates Mike Tracy, Peter Jacobson, Matt Bernstein, Kerri Hirsch, Sam Koch and Katie Feinstein. "It says a lot about our community and kids that they want to come back here and coach these kids," San Marco said. "It says

they had a good experience. A lot of our students come back to Edgemont to raise their families because they know it's a great atmosphere. That's one of the reasons I've been here since 1968."

San Marco played football, basketball and baseball at Edgemont, but even when he coached tennis he coached it like a team sport, perhaps because that's the only way he knew how. As a coach he had to learn soccer on the job and in his second year the team was in the Section 1 finals. However, he felt like he wasn't doing a good job because he didn't know the sport that well and actually considered quitting. Then reality struck and he realized what he could actually do when he learned the game, so he spent countless hours doing just that. After about a decade he thought he had it figured out, but was still learning. He even wrote one of the better soccer coaching manuals, "Coaching Kids to Play Soccer: Everything you Need to Know to Coach Kids 6-16" (Simon & Schuster, 1987) — the book was later re-released — and trained coaches for New York State.

In the beginning San Marco looked to Lou Gallo of Rye, another football guy turned soccer coach. "Three days a week I would play soccer with the kids at Rye," San Marco said. "He would introduce me as 'Jim San Marco, the guy with a thousand questions.' I needed to know whatever it was inside and out. If a kid asked me something I needed to come through for him. I needed to have the answer for him. If I didn't I would get it for him."

Griffin is one of countless student-athletes to come through Edgemont and remember what San Marco meant to him on and off the field. Then there are many who probably don't even realize the impact San Marco has had on the community. But that's OK with San Marco. As long as he makes it through his public appearance on Dec. 14, the plaque on the new gym, the Jim San Marco Gymnasium, will tell everyone what they need to know.

Perhaps one day another of San Marco's dreams will come to fruition — an all-weather turf field with lights at Blanford Field. But that's a project for another day.