

Building football tradition challenges Long Island coach

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September 8, 2014 9:42 AM MST



At the Half Hollow Hills East High School football team golf tournament fundraiser are, from left, former player James Metzger, Coach Mike Maratto and Athletic Director Joe Pennachio. Credit: Carlene Cournane

The previous article (["Former HHH East Football Players Support New Season"](#)) explained the role of the booster club and the involvement of alumni to support the new football tradition at

Long Island's Half Hollow Hills East High School. This new chapter in the school's playbook began soon after the end of the last football season.

“We had a disappointing year last season,” said HHH East Athletic Director Joseph Pennacchio. “Our zero and eight record reflected a large number of injuries, including the loss of our starting quarterback in the second game. Many sophomores had to step up and start, which will give us a huge advantage this year as we build up our football program.”

The new era of football at HHH East began with the appointment of Mike Maratto, 34, as head coach. He's played the game since he was seven years old. A 1998 graduate of St. Anthony's High School (Melville, New York), Maratto was a varsity starter for three seasons and team captain during his junior and senior years. He also played one year at Stony Brook before focusing completely on his studies. From that moment, he realized he had the desire to coach.

“I always wanted to have an impact on the lives of others and I want to continue to offer my experiences and knowledge to students and athletes,” said Maratto.

From Bulldogs To Thunderbirds

That coaching and teaching experience began with the PAL Huntington Bulldogs, a team of seven and eight year olds, from 1999 until 2000. To further explore his coaching passion, Maratto approached John Glenn High School Head Coach Dave Shanahan. That school is in Long Island's Elwood School District, where Maratto lived when he started playing ball. He was invited to join the staff as defensive coordinator (2002-2004) and then served as junior varsity head coach (2004-2006).

While coaching, Maratto enrolled at Hofstra University to earn his degree in physical education. He returned to St. Anthony's as a teacher and junior varsity offensive coordinator (2006-2009).

“A friend then introduced me to Sachem North High School head football coach Dave Falco,” added Maratto, who served as Falco's offensive coordinator from 2009 until 2013, when the school won the Long Island Championship. “I enjoyed coaching at Sachem and appreciate all that I learned, and I always wanted to oversee my own program. I saw how my mentors developed their programs and I realized that this is what I always wanted to do. I felt that HHH East always has had the athletes. The school program just needed a leader to take a program and build it from the bottom up.”

Maratto joined HHH East last February. He quickly began to shape the Thunderbirds football program, focusing on the culture, training and expanding student participation.

“We needed to change the environment and culture of the team and the district toward the football program,” said Maratto. “This is not a losing program. We must forget last season. Every step we are taking is moving us forward.”

“All-in” Commitment

The building process includes a completely new coaching staff. Gary Comstock and Chris Rickert have followed Maratto from Sachem North High School. Rich Schaub, the retired athletic director from Syosset High School, also has joined the varsity staff. On the JV level, John Ruggiero, a coach from Sachem and Ward Melville in Suffolk County’s Three Village Central School District, was named head coach. He is assisted by Andrew Tuorto, a teacher in the district and assistant varsity wrestling coach at the high school.

“Our new motto is ‘All-in,’” added Maratto. “That’s for the players, their parents, the administration and the district. We want to show commitment and create a positive buzz about the football program.”

A new workout program for the team began last March while training started in July. The HHHE Thunder and Lightning Training Program includes work in the weight room (the thunder) and speed and conditioning (the lightning) on the field. During the summer, the team maintained this training program four days each week and several hours per day. Don Herr, the athletic trainer at HHH East, is helping the team with its speed and conditioning this season.

The varsity has expanded its roster from 22 players last season to 35 who will start the new season versus Centereach High School on Friday, September 12, at 6 p.m. Following the “All-in” philosophy, Maratto was able to gain the support of veteran players to recruit classmates for the program.

“These kids have shown me already that they want it,” concluded Maratto. “They want to put in the hard work. From this, the wins will come. We are concerned only about our team and how we can get better. We worry only about what we do as that is all we can control.”

Creating a winning football program is not the only commitment made by Maratto, his coaches and the players. They will build a tradition together and that tradition has started with welcoming home former successful HHH East players. To solidify the past with the present and then the future, an eight-foot monument will be built on school grounds. A four-foot lightning bolt will rest atop a stone base. A plaque will be dedicated to all past, present and future Thunderbirds.

“I am looking to completely turn this whole program around,” said Coach Maratto, “and make this a place that the Thunderbird family can enjoy with pride. With the alumni’s help, and the help of our boosters, I know we will have much success in the years to come. All of this is possible from the great training I have received from my mentors, from my coaches and players, and with their support and the support of my family. I wouldn’t have been able to follow this long road to become a varsity head coach in a great school district without my wife, Christina, and my children, seven-year-old Samantha and two-year-old Nicholas, being right here with me.”