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Former HHH East football players support new season

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Members of the Half Hollow Hills East High School 1975 championship football team. From left: Joe Maehr, Steve Spinelli, James Metzger, Fred O'Meally and Joe Marotta.

Credit: Carlene Cournane

It started with emails.

Before the last school year ended, Brigiette Spinelli was busy organizing a summer fundraiser for the Half Hollow Hills East football team on Long Island, New York. As the liaison between team coaches and the Hills East Football Booster Club, Spinelli was determined to engage former Thunderbird players to help inspire and support the players, coaches, parents and community as the school prepares for quite a different season.

One email went to James C. Metzger.

“Brigiette’s email message to me was filled with passion,” said Metzger, CEO and founder of The Whitmore Group, a leading New York insurance firm headquartered in Garden City. “From my involvement with the school’s lacrosse program, I had known that the football program had suffered through a disappointing season. Brigiette’s optimistic message, starting with information about the arrival of a new head coach [Mike Maratto] and the need to build a bridge of tradition and winning from today back to the successful teams of the past, hooked me immediately. I needed to be at the event with former teammates to support the program, to support these young players and to support my alma mater.”

History creates tradition and a proud tradition helps foster future success. Metzger first learned this lesson as a three-sport athlete at Half Hollow Hills East High School, and he has carried this message, among many lessons, from the sports field over to his business career. Now, he and a small huddle of other HHH East football standouts from the 1970s have become involved with the current team.

Vintage HHHE Stars

Metzger was one of several 1975 championship season (Conference AAA-1) players who welcomed the new coach's arrival and supported the Fourth Annual HHHE Football Golf Outing during July. It is the booster club’s largest fundraiser of the season and more than \$6,000 was raised this year.

Other star players from that championship year—Joe Maehr, Joseph Marotta, Fred O’Meally and Steve Spinelli—joined Metzger to support the football program. Proceeds from the event, plus several other smaller fundraisers held throughout the year, will be used to lease lights for the annual Friday Night Lights Game scheduled against Smithtown High School West (October 17 at 6 p.m.) and to purchase video equipment for practices and games.

On the gridiron, Metzger was a three-year varsity starter, leading the team in scoring each season (1974-1976) and in rushing during 1975 and 1976. He recorded 27 touchdowns and 170 points. His record totals include 2,155 rushing yards and 2,777 total yards. As a senior, Metzger was the only high school athlete named to the North-South All-Star Games for football and lacrosse.

Maehr also was an all-star in football, as the team quarterback, and lacrosse. Marotta started at tackle on offense and defense during 1974 and 1975. Although he was the largest player on the team, Marotta was agile, quick and very athletic. O’Meally, an all-star with the 1975 team, was

considered one of the meanest players on the field, according to Metzger, and he was just as talented and accomplished as a wrestler. Spinelli played football and lacrosse, working both offense and defense on the championship football team.

As title sponsor of the event, Metzger received the opportunity to convey a few words to the players of this year's HHH East football program and their parents. He advised the players that they will benefit greatly from organized sports and that playing on a team will be a key ingredient in a foundation that will shape their personal and professional lives.

“Competition that is experienced as an athlete,” he said, “will serve you in all walks of life.”

Metzger also let the players know his personal feelings about football as he helped them envision what they will experience on the field. Since he played lacrosse, basketball and football for the school, Metzger remembered the competition of more than 30 years ago as if it occurred yesterday.

“Lacrosse is a rough game,” he said. “Basketball is a deceptively rough game. But football is a brutal game. Be prepared!”

In the [next article](#), Half Hollow Hills East Coach Mike Maratto explains his guarantee that his players will be prepared from the opening game whistle.