

“BASKETBALL, PURPLE AND GOLD STYLE”

By Frank W. Santucci

In the 1940's and 1950's Verona was known around Allegheny County for having the most bars and taverns per capita than any other community. Also a notable significant fact about Verona, was that it had a shortest block with only one building on it; the Verona Police Station.

Verona High School also had its share of notoriety. The high school in 1940 boasted of having a boxing team, male cheerleaders, and an alumni who played for the Pittsburgh Steelers late 1940's and early 1950's. His name was Charles "Charlie" Mehelich, a graduate of Duquesne University. Many Verona High School graduates became members of our armed forces in WWII, six of them were killed during the war years.

But during the early 1940's and into the early 1950's Verona High was noted for its basketball successes. Prior to 1943 the varsity was only mediocre at best, but with the arrival and hiring of a new coach, Verona High became the scourge of the river towns. These towns consisted of Oakmont whose team played on a stage; Sharpsburg's gym was on the third floor with a low ceiling; Etna's gym was an old swimming pool; Millvale played on a stage with netting on the sides to catch an errant player; Aspinwall's gym was unique because the fans were perched four feet behind the bankboard; Springdale had a normal gym; Arnold a large gym; East Deer had pillars dangerously close to the side lines; and, Edgewood had a long narrow gym with a balcony.

The new coach was William Monaco, an athlete and graduate of New Castle High School and Slippery Rock College. He was short 5' 7" and weighed about 155 pounds. When he chewed tobacco, it would ooze out the sides of his mouth outlining his chin as though it appeared to be penciled in. He taught health and social studies, his classes were all programmed, no spontaneity, was well-liked by the faculty and had a personality with a wonderful ability to communicate. His tenure lasted twelve years. His assistant was always the football coach. In the forties it was a man named Clark, after him came Ray Testa, then John LaFrankie and into the 1950's it was Joseph Zelek. During the Monaco era Verona was in the playoffs six times and came in first or second in section play nine times.

In November of 1951 Springdale came to Verona for a game. Springdale had a reputation for having a good basketball team, but this notoriety was usually overshadowed by the lack of sportsmanship. After the game a free-for-all broke out with fans and players in a giant melee. Coach Monaco immediately grabbed George (Jocko) Rice and locked him in his office. The Principal, Mr. Anderson was trying to send the Verona people back into the stands; I was one of them but at the top of the steps, John LaFrankie, the Assistant Coach was chasing us back to the floor and encouraging us to assist the local combatants. There were exit doors by the gym that led to the outside. The crowd pushed out and the fighting continued in the grassy area; two police officers and approximately fifty people fighting. Jim Dorsey was in the middle of it all, and a graduate of Springdale, Heimbacker, was the prime target for the Verona faithful. What

finally stopped the action is not known, but it was raining and this may have been a cooling effect on the hot bloods.

An investigation was done by the WPIAL and no sanctions were handed down, although it did make a monumental change for the next Springdale game at Oakmont. The game was originally scheduled for 7 p.m. but due to the Verona-Springdale fight, the game was played at 3 p.m., no spectators and only school officials present. Even though Verona and Oakmont were intense rivals, Springdale was the common enemy and remained so for many years.

Verona played in Section 13-B and their record for the 1951 basketball season was 19 – 4, good enough for second place; Arnold won the section. Back in the 1950's and 1960's only the top team went to the playoffs. By the late 1950's and early 1960's, Coach Monaco was nearing the end of his career. Verona High School did have some powerful football teams under Coach Joe Zelek, but, Verona will always be known as a basketball school.

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