

## **TEE IT UP**

### **Former Malvern Prep coach Gamp Pellegrini talks about career, championships, retirement**

**By Joshua Funk  
For PA Football News**

Right off the bat, young coaches long to hoist some young high school football coach's dream and yearn to win a championship. Gamp Pellegrini was one such coach, and his "lust," if you want to call it that, for a championship nearly cost him a chance to win one early in his career.

The short of it – Pellegrini was a numbers cruncher. Listening to him talk of the early days (and years) of his career, enrollment figures played a big role in whether or not he thought a school could be successful.

In reality, numbers and enrollment don't play that large of a factor except increasing the potential talent pool. If enrollment signified the way to win a championship, then Reading and North Penn would meet in the "AAAA" Eastern Finals every year.

And, ultimately, the majority of Pellegrini's coaching success (19 Inter-AC championships, two teams finishing a season #1 in southeastern PA) came at a small, private school 10 minutes from his house. That school was Malvern Prep, which would be considered a "AAA" school by PIAA enrollment figures.

But success didn't come right off the bat for a man who would ultimately become the winningest coach in the Philadelphia area by winning 278 games in his career.

It took some time for things to really get rolling for Pellegrini. He began his career as a head coach at St. Thomas More, which was his alma mater. With an enrollment of around 800 boys, More was one of the smallest Catholic League schools at the time. And it wasn't very successful.

"It really was a dormant program," Pellegrini said. "But I had graduated from there, and it kind of felt like home to me. So I took the (More) job, not knowing that 42 years later, I would retire."

He spent three years at St. Thomas before moving on to St. Joseph's Prep. Pellegrini was in pursuit of a Catholic League championship, the pinnacle achievement that all CL football teams strive for. But seven years into his tenure with St. Joe's, Pellegrini still hadn't won the championship he so coveted. He had only reached the championship game once, and lost. So, hungry for a trophy, Pellegrini applied for the recently-vacated Monsignor Bonner head coaching position.

"They (Bonner) asked me why I'd want to leave the comfortable position I was in at St. Joe's Prep, and I told them flat out it was because I didn't think I could ever win a PCL title there (at

Prep),” Pellegrini said. “Long story short, I didn’t get the Bonner job. So I went back to St. Joe’s, and not only did we win the PCL title, we won the Philadelphia City championship, too.”

PCL championship in hand, though, Pellegrini wasn’t considering staying with the Hawks. At the time, he was living in West Chester, working in Newtown Square, and then commuting to 17<sup>th</sup> & Girard in Philadelphia. He had two young boys, and he said that he had to look out for them. Malvern Prep was 10 minutes from his house, and he applied for the position which opened up after the 1977 season, and got the job.

Pellegrini didn’t know it, but he was entering a situation where the football was pretty successful. Malvern was coming off of four consecutive Inter-AC conference championships. Being a part of the PCL, Pellegrini never followed what was going on in the Inter-AC.

In his first three years at Malvern, the Friars won three Inter-AC championships. Pellegrini said it led a local sportswriter at the time to write, “There are dynasties, and then, there’s Malvern Prep.” (Malvern won seven straight Inter-AC titles between 1974-’80 – the second longest run of consecutive conference titles won at that time in conference history. William Penn Charter won 12 straight conference titles from 1913-’24).

In all, he won 19 Inter-AC championships in 31 years at Malvern. Along the way, Pellegrini broke Al Angelo’s record for most wins by a Philadelphia head coach, which stood at 184. Angelo was a longtime coach who had a very high winning percentage at Frankford High School, a member of the Philadelphia Public League.

“You don’t really pay attention to records until they start telling you about it all the time,” Pellegrini said. “What did I wind up finishing with – 278 wins? That’s 22 shy of 300. But then once I got there (to 300), there would have been another record to go after.

“You know it’s just a game,” he continued, “but you can’t bring yourself to believe that because winning and losing is so very important. It’s not all of what it’s about, obviously, but why keep score if no one’s going to win or lose?”

But coaching in the Inter-AC conference meant two things: 1. The number of games in a season usually reached between nine, 10, or 11 games in number, depending on the number of regular season games played and whether or not the team played a game Thanksgiving morning, and 2. There was no chance to compete for a PIAA title – the Inter-AC conference is not a member of the PIAA in any sport.

“Some years, we played only nine games,” Pellegrini said. “I can remember having some 8-1 football teams in my time. It’s harder and harder to get games now with schools in the area going to the PIAA.

“If we had had the opportunity to do that (play for a PIAA title), it would have been great,” Pellegrini continued. “Some of the teams – I has four undefeated teams – I certainly think one of those four teams could have competed. And I had a bunch of 9-1 teams that I thought could have

competed also, but I never bothered with it too much. I was satisfied with what we had, and the fact that we never played for a PIAA title didn't bother me."

Now, all that's left for Pellegrini to do is enjoy his retirement.

"I've gotten so many honors," he said. "I've been thanked 100-fold. Now, hopefully, I'll play some more golf."