



VERY BUSY IN GOAL......Blue Devil goalie Eric Zagorski made a season-high 34 saves against seventh-seeded Chatham in the first round of the NJSIAA/Devils public schools tournament at Mennen Arena in Morris Township. Craig Esposito, Brian Davidson and Jimmy Bender each scored goals in the 4-3 loss.



Devil's Den On the Court, Venezia In a Class of His Own

By BRUCE JOHNSON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Devil of the Week
Matt Meserole
Boys swimming

Bob Brewster got some really good news recently when Mike Venezia told the veteran WHS baseball coach that he'd be coming back out for the team this spring. The Colgate-bound Venezia is one of those special athletes who come along every once in a long while. He could've been a big help to the WHS football program, and now he may help what looked like a rebuilding baseball season become rather interesting.

But basketball is his main sport, the one he'll play at Colgate. The 6-foot-2 senior led WHS to a 16-10 record this winter in the brutal Watchung Conference. Sure, he had lots of help from classmates Tommy Bonard, Dan Pritsker, Santo Nardi and a talented group of sophomores. But Venezia was clearly the guy everything revolved around, finishing the season with 493 points (sixth best in WHS history), and 1,079 for his career (third best). He could've just relaxed and chilled in this, his seniorspring, but the competitive juices brought him back to the diamond.

"Growing up, I was a running back and quarterback in PAL football from fourth through eighth grade. I pitched and played short and third in baseball up until last year, and I played basketball in the WBA and in traveling leagues and AAU since I was in third grade, most recently with the Jersey Shore

Warriors," Venezia said.

"Freshman year I decided not to play football so I could concentrate more on basketball and baseball. I missed (football) but I felt it was a sacrifice I had to make, to work harder in the other two sports. Last spring was a big recruiting year for basketball. I wanted to be able to go to as many camps and tournaments playing with my AAU team, so again I had to choose. I missed not playing baseball, but I feel it was a good decision. But I'm very excited to be back this year."

The Venezia family moved to Westfield 16 years ago. Mike's parents were both athletes, his mom a track performer in Mount Carmel, Pa., and his dad a football-basketball-baseball player at Maria Regina in Uniondale, N.Y., and later a pitcher at Villanova and at the California Angels' AA farm team. The parents' athleticism was obviously inherited by their kids: in addition to Mike, older sister Lisa was a three-sport (volleyball, basketball, softball) captain at WHS as a senior and is currently in her last year at Villanova, while younger sister Diana is a WHS freshman who has shown talent beyond her years helping the varsity volleyball and basketball teams.

As someone who has seen all the great players at WHS from the great teams of the early 1960s through this

year's squad, it may be time for a little perspective on Venezia's game for those who haven't had the pleasure to see him play. Although there are things that he feels could be improved — and that's true of just about any top athlete, or should be true — to watch him play is to see arguably the best all-around player to ever wear the Blue and White uniform. He can shoot long-range (think Mike Comandini, WHS '93), take it to the hoop (Bob Felter, '65), play defense (Jerry Richards, '65), rebound (Boo Bowers, '77), pass (Tim Goski, '73) and handle the ball (Dick Myers, '62). That's quite a complete package.

"I take pride in my ability to be a strong shooter, my jumping ability and playing solid man-to-man defense," he said. "I know I need to improve on being strong and confident with the ball and taking it to the basket more regularly. I've always worked hard. I try not to take anything for granted. My father always puts me in my place, telling me I need to practice more and work harder to get where I want to be. I've had a good career at WHS and it's been great playing with all of my teammates the last four years. But there's always room for improvement and my goal is to get a lot better and have a solid career at Colgate."

Venezia's game is so quietly smooth that sometimes you might think he scored 10 or 12 points only to check the newspaper the next day and see he had 24 or 30. "I try to play within the team concept and eventually the game will come to me," he said. "But, yeah, sometimes I'm not aware of how many points I scored until the next day in the paper."

He is one of just four WHS males to score 1,000 career points. He reached the magic number during a 29-point outburst against Hillsborough, and finished his career with 1,079, ahead of Bowers (1,002) and trailing just Felter (1,094) and big Bob King (1,329).

Looking back on his four years of WHS basketball, the thing that sticks out the most to Venezia is not being a 1,000-plus points scorer, or earning a scholarship to Colgate.

"The thing I'm most proud of is making the state tournament all four years of high school, and being on a competitive team playing in the Watchung Conference," said Venezia, whose WHS teams went a combined 57-37. "Tommy Bonard and myself are the first players, at least in coach (Kevin) Everly's era, to make states all four years. That's not easy to do in this conference, so I'm very proud of that."

After four years helping the basketball team be a more-than-competitive pain-in-the-butt to its opponents, Venezia rejoins an established baseball program that has been among the county's elite for over 40 years, from even before the days when Brewster was a player (1966-68). The coach was

obviously pleased to hear of Venezia's return.

"Two years ago Mike was an outstanding pitcher on our jayvee team that was seeded No. 1 in the county jayvee tournament (losing in the quarterfinals to A.L. Johnson)," Brewster said. "We're looking at him first as a pitcher, and anything else will be gravy."

SWIM RECORD SAFE

The WHS boys swim team has won the Union County championship 50 of the last 51 years, including a national record 42 consecutive titles from 1957-98. That national record was being threatened by Greenwich, Conn., which until last Thursday night had won 36 straight Fairfield County championships. New Canaan was the streak-snapper, scoring 461 points, to Greenwich's 384. Darien was third with 280. (Think they had a wine and brie party afterward?)

The nearest known team to WHS's record is St. Joseph in Metuchen. The Falcons have won every Greater Middlesex Conference crown since the first meet in 1979, so they're at 29 in a row.

WHO'S (NOT) COUNTING?

There are 25 days until the WHS baseball season opens at Plainfield, less than four weeks until coach Bob Brewster unveils his 25th team, one that promises to be among the most enjoyable to watch in a while. Last year's "Murderer's Row" has gone off to Wake Forest, Villanova, Rowan and assorted other colleges, leaving Justin Olsen as the lone returning starter. But if anybody thinks this team isn't going to be both good and fun, they haven't been paying attention. Tom Bonard, Mike Venezia, Joe Schurig, Kevin Hennessey, Sean Ferro, Pete Antonelli, Evan Shapiro, Joe Vall-Llobera, Mike Lessner, Chris Jenkins and others will keep WHS in the hunt for county and sectional titles. You read it here first!

ON THIS DATE

1958: Terry Bentley wins the 100 butterfly and Jay Pierson captures the 100 backstroke as WHS, under coach Joe Kursar, wins the first of what is now 20 state championships, in Princeton's Dillon Pool.

DEVIL OF THE WEEK

This week's free sub from Al the Owner at Westfield Subs (261 South Avenue East) goes to Matt Meserole. The only freshman in the entire state swimming in an individual event at Sunday's Meet of Champions, "Mez" finished 11th in the 100 backstroke and his time of 54.73 in Saturday's trials was good for No. 6 all-time on the WHS Top 15 List.

The Devil's Den appears Thursday in The Westfield Leader during the scholastic year. Contact us with comments, complaints and suggestions at bj1019@aol.com. GO DEVILS!

Patriots Oust Raiders, 49-46, In Boys Basketball Sections

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

owned the boards. They got some key rebounds. A game like that was going to come down to one little fault and it did."

Both teams mixed some outside shooting with inside shooting in the first quarter that was won by the Patriots, 16-14. J.T. D'Amico hit all 10 of his points, including two 3-pointers, to give the Patriots a 14-7 lead with two minutes left in the quarter but Raider Reggie Solomon (10 points, 3 steals) nailed a two and a three and Lordly Okarter (5 rebounds, 1 block) added a lay-up.

In the second quarter, junior forward Rob Zekunde (8 points, 4 rebounds) and sophomore forward Kevin Maroney (10 rebounds) came off the bench and added strength inside. Dougher, who had a driving lay-up, and Bayard each sank a 3-pointer and Zekunde put in two lay-ups and two free throws to lead the Raiders to a 16-11 edge and a 30-27, halftime lead.

"Rob did a good job, gave us some good minutes, rebounded the ball well. I thought he played well," said Doherty.

Darnell Dortch (4 points, 1 block) added more power under the boards as the Raiders took a 41-37 lead at the end of the third quarter. Dougher added a lay-up and two free throws, Solomon banged a 3-pointer and Zekunde sank two free throws.

Patriot star guard Brandon Hall came to life in the fourth quarter in a big way with driving lay-ups, which drew fouls. Hall hit all 10 of his points, including six of eight from the line.

"The kid is a great guard. We knew in the fourth quarter, he was going to try to step up. He got some good penetration. He's a big, tough runner," said Doherty.

The Raiders held a slim, 44-43 lead with 4:24 remaining until LaSala and Hall each sank two free throws to put the Patriots up 47-44. Dougher and Bayard each added a free throw but, as time was running down, Hall sank two more free throws to force the Raiders to go for a 3-pointer.

Sc. Pl.-Fanwood	14	16	11	5	46
Colonia	16	11	10	12	49



HOUNDING THE RAIDERS' TOP SCORERS......Greg Bayard, No. 24, and teammate Bryan Dougher, not shown, were given very little elbowroom to operate against Colonia in the sectional playoff game.

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