

Era of excellence in sports comes to an end



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

The sun sets on a vacant field at Cardinal Mooney High School, which is closing this month because of a huge debt and a declining enrollment.

By Richard A. Kiley

Staff writer

Eight weeks have passed since officials of the diocese and Cardinal Mooney High School announced the closing of the Greece high school, but the pain for many teachers and students has not abated.

"For all of us, it gets harder and harder as it nears the end," said Paul Forte, a longtime teacher and coach at Mooney. "They say things pass with time, but the pain and the hurt haven't subsided."

"We're coming into the realization that this is it," he added.

Forte believes that Mooney's closing is — first and foremost — a tragedy, because instructors there will never again be able to provide a quality Catholic education for students wishing to attend school there.

But there are more ramifications, including the end of many years of athletic excellence at Mooney.

For many people, the mere mention of athletics at Cardinal Mooney brings one name to mind: Ed Nietopski. For a quarter of a century, Nietopski has coached and administered inside Mooney's walls, compiling a record of 451-115 in baseball and a 339-172 mark on the basketball court.

In Nietopski's early years, Catholic schools weren't part of Section 5, so Mooney didn't compete in the sectionals. That changed in the late '70s, and Nietopski's baseball teams later won sectional titles in 1980 and 1982. The basketball Car-

dinals also won a sectional trophy in 1982.

Nietopski, who came to Mooney in 1964 after seven years at Brockport High School, was recently named the new varsity basketball coach at Bishop Kearney High School. The former shortstop for the Rochester Red Wings — who were then affiliated with the St. Louis Cardinal organization — also will serve as the chairman of the physical education education department.

"I'm really looking forward to the new opportunity ... but it will be tough," Nietopski said in a recent interview. "So many great kids have come in and out of here."

Too many to mention, but names like Dave Dasch, Scott Delgatti, Jim Mitchell and Jim Volkmer are well-known among fans of Mooney baseball over the years.

Probably the most flamboyant athlete to come out of the Catholic high school in Greece was Glenn Hagan, who — after helping Mooney establish its basketball program — went on to star at St. Bonaventure University.

With Hagan and a talented corps of other players — including former McQuaid coach Dan Pannagio — the Cards became one of the Rochester area's most exciting basketball teams in the early '70s.

Nietopski has also sent five of his children to Mooney. He coached three sons — Mike, Tim and Jim — and two daughters, twins Cathy and Theresa, played on some dominant soccer, basketball and softball

teams. Both women just finished outstanding careers at Monroe Community College.

The closing of Mooney has broken up a close-knit faculty at the school, including veteran coaches Paul Forte and Scott Morrison. The two have been good friends for a long time, but will be working at different schools next year. Forte will teach history at Bishop Kearney, and Morrison will be a business teacher at Aquinas.

Although he is thankful for the opportunity Kearney has given him, Forte said his last few days and those of other faculty members at Mooney this week will be gut-wrenching.

"It's not the ideal situation ... The ideal situation for us would be to stay at Mooney," said Forte, who will coach the girls' varsity basketball team and assist with the boys' soccer and girls' softball programs.

In addition to Nietopski, Forte will be joined by John Walker and many Mooney students who will continue their Catholic education at Kearney.

The week school officials made the announcement to close Mooney is still fresh in Forte's mind. The day the announcement came, Mooney played Aquinas in a Private-Parochial League softball game.

"The game was the furthest thing from their minds," said Forte, whose team ended up beating AQ 3-0. "Some of the kids knew already when we beat Mercy the

game before."

Forte said the difference in the game came when about 100 Mooney alumni, who had heard the announcement of the school's closing, gathered near the field to offer encouragement to Mooney's players. "We got the strength we needed to win from the people who showed up," he said.

Mooney's quest to win its last sectional championship in softball — the Cards won two under Joette Abbey — ended in a 4-3 loss to eventual Class AA champion Irondequoit in early June. It was a cruel ending for the players, who had hoped to go out as champions.

"I never talked about the closing. To be honest, we just thought we had the talent to win the whole thing," Forte said. "The realization that this was the last chance for a Mooney team to win a title really hurt the girls."

In addition to coaching the girls to a 43-7 record in softball the last two years, Forte coached the boys' soccer team to a 134-37-15 mark the last 10 years. His greatest coaching moment came in 1983 when the Cardinals won the state soccer title in Class A.

"It wasn't the most talented (soccer) team I've ever had, but it was the most unselfish," said Forte, who also coached the JV boys' basketball team at Mooney for six years. "They exemplified the word 'team.'"

The exceptionally balanced squad was led by sweeper Ken Merkey, midfielder Paul Hilling — "he was our assist man," Forte said — and other players like Jack Blake, Reggie Bittner and Larry Vay. Blake scored the winning goal in every sectional and state playoff game in 1983.

The team was also outstanding defensively, allowing just eight goals — none in the state tournament — led by goalie Tom McKeon.

Forte called former Kearney soccer coach Patsy Tata, who was a 1982 graduate of Mooney, "probably the best soccer player I ever had."

"His knowledge of the game was tremendous. He was a natural," Forte said.

Scott Morrison coached the girls' varsity soccer team at Mooney for seven years and the girls' varsity basketball team for five. Morrison's teams at Mooney were built on defense. Both his soccer and basketball teams reached the sectional final this year. Mooney won the Section 5 Class BB title in basketball, but lost in the Class BB soccer final.

"These girls were really a pleasure to

Johnston says goodbye to Notre Dame

By Richard A. Kiley

Staff writer

This week was probably one of the toughest Mike Johnston had to endure in a long time.

After spending more than two decades at Elmira Notre Dame as a student, coach, athletic director and vice principal, Johnston will be leaving the diocesan high school to become the new high school principal at Odessa-Montour.

"I'm leaving a good situation for another good situation," said Johnston, who was named vice principal at Notre Dame last summer. "But this is really going to be tough for me not seeing the faculty and staff on a regular basis anymore. There are such warm and caring people here."

Johnston added that he holds a special place "for all the coaches, students and the athletes I worked worked so closely with over the years."

These people made his decision to leave very difficult, Johnston said, "but this is

an outstanding opportunity for me ... one I can't pass up."

Johnston's distinguished coaching career, which spanned 18 years, featured many outstanding moments. His finest hour came in March of 1978, when his Crusaders nipped Byram Hills of Westchester and then routed Long Island powerhouse New Hyde Park Roosevelt for the state Class A basketball title.

But Johnston's greatest trademark was his ability to motivate players into believing that they could accomplish anything, no matter what the odds. In the early 1970s, he turned around the school's football program when others — including the school principal — thought a long winless streak had become too much of an emotional burden for students at the school.

Johnston — who was an all-city star in football, basketball and baseball at Notre Dame from 1960-63 — returned to his alma mater in 1971 as a business teacher, guidance counselor and varsity football

coach. He took over a grid program that hadn't tasted victory since 1967. The winless streak dragged on for 29 games until October 7, 1972, when the Crusaders beat Corning West, 13-0, in the fourth week of the season.

"The ending of that streak is right up there with my greatest wins," said Johnston, who was also a Little All-American quarterback at Alfred University. "Warren Tessier (then-principal of Notre Dame) was seriously considering dropping football."

Not one to sell his players short, Johnston pleaded with Tessier to keep the program going. "I told him I really felt we had some outstanding talent coming back, and that these players were capable of winning again."

Notre Dame finished the 1972 season with two more wins — going 3-4-1 overall — but the athletes and Johnston gained even more that season.

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