

Pete Pavia banquets offer more than just big names

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Getting people to agree on the true meaning of love is not an easy task.

That is, unless those people have ever attended a Pete Pavia Sports Celebrity Dinner.

Or gotten to know the man for whom this banquet is named. Who has battled cancer for 13 years.

Who spent several hours in the hospital receiving treatments on the day of his latest dinner on June 8, went home and changed, and popped into the Rochester Riverside Convention Center with an ear-to-ear smile that masked his pain.

Who can get some of the nation's leading sports celebrities to come to this dinner — at no charge — year after year.

Whose efforts at organizing these annual banquets, beginning in 1989, have helped raise more than \$100,000 for thousands of children afflicted with the same awful disease as his own.

The 53-year-old Pavia, who gained the reputation as one of the finest college basketball officials in the United States, is achieving similar stature with the overwhelming success of his dinners. The June 8 event drew approximately 1,000 people to the Convention Center. Those in attendance got to view a head table that featured Divi-

sion I basketball coaches such as Jim Boeheim (Syracuse), P.J. Carlesimo (Seton Hall), Tom Penders (Texas), John Calipari (Massachusetts) and Paul Evans (Pittsburgh).

Also attending were members of the Super Bowl champion Washington Redskins, including players Mark Murphy, Jeff Bostic and Chip Lohmiller; and inspiring speakers such as Jim MacLaren, a triathlete who competes with an artificial leg; and Dave Clark, a polio victim who became a professional baseball player and manager.

They all came for Pavia, as well as the dinner's main beneficiary — Camp Good Days and Special Times, a residential camping program for cancer-stricken children located on Keuka Lake.

One of the most respected basketball figures in the country following Seton Hall's trip to the NCAA finals in 1989, Carlesimo takes time out every year to come up to Rochester from East Rutherford, N.J. In fact, he's served as master of ceremonies for the last two Pavia dinners.

"The camp is just so special. When you get to know the kids there, and get to know Pete, there's nothing that we wouldn't do for them. It's really very simple," Carlesimo told the *Catholic Courier*.

Frank Layden, former player and head coach at Niagara University, rivals Carlesimo as one of the ban-



Pete Pavia reacts to comments made during this year's banquet June 8 at Rochester's Riverside Convention Center.

quet's most humorous speakers. Yet Layden turned serious when discussing the cause at hand.

"Pete Pavia has made a great many sacrifices," remarked Layden, now president and former coach of the Utah Jazz in the National Basketball Association.

Many speakers have in some way experienced cancer in their own lives. "Anybody who has ever been associated with Pete Pavia has been touched in a positive way," remarked Bostic, a center for the Redskins, whose mother died of cancer five years ago.

Three years ago, eventual Super Bowl MVP Mark Rypien broke down on the podium when describing the struggles of a cancer-stricken son of the Redskins' strength coach.

To Pavia, the emotion that flows out of these banquets is like nothing he's ever seen.

"It's turned into a big family thing. It's probably the only dinner in the country where you walk in, and immediately there's love and caring," Pavia remarked.

Although he won't take just any big name that comes along, many of Pavia's celebrity speakers have been secured through the contacts he's developed over many years of officiating in the Big East Conference.

"When we first started the dinner, I said the only way we'd do this is to get high-class people who spoke well and were somehow involved with seeing students and athletes do better in life," Pavia explained.

"Nobody's ever charged a penny. In fact, some even pay their own way and some make donations," he added.

Pavia began formulating plans for this dinner with his friend, Camp Good Days Chairman Gary Mervis, after Mervis' daughter, Teddi, died of cancer in 1982.

"We were talking about having a dinner to help give children with cancer a higher quality of life, and that's what it actually turned out to be," said Pavia.

A resident of Brighton, Pavia lives with his wife of five years, Deborah, and attends St. Louis Church in Pittsford. He has been well known in the Rochester community since he was an All-City baseball and basketball standout for Aquinas Institute in the mid-1950s.

Pavia went on to play college baseball as a catcher for Lafayette College in Easton, Pa. He was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates organization, but instead responded to another draft — the U.S. Army — in 1961.

His officiating career actually began while stationed in Anchorage, Alaska. Upon his return to Rochester, Pavia officiated high school games through the 1960s amid his duties at the former

Madison High School, where he taught until 1975 before going into business as a sporting goods merchant. For the last five years he has owned Pete Pavia Team Sports, 361 N. Washington St., Penfield.

Pavia not only reached the highest college ranks of officiating, but he also spent 1 1/2 seasons as an NBA referee in the early 1970s.

He worked the Big East Conference from its inception in 1979 until 1991. This past season, Pavia served as assistant supervisor of Big East officials.

During his illustrious officiating career, Pavia officiated the 1986 NCAA Division I championship game in which Louisville defeated Duke, 72-69. He also worked the 1991 NCAA semifinal contest which produced the most controversial moment of Pavia's career — his ejection of normally mild-mannered North Carolina Coach Dean Smith near the end of the Tar Heels' loss to Kansas.

Yet that incident was not reflective of Pavia's court demeanor as described by Dick Slomkowski, a friend of Pavia's for three decades who has called several Division I games with him.

"He was always very inconspicuous on the court. Coaches would say before the game, 'We've got Pavia; he's going to do a good job,'" remarked Slomkowski, a physical education instructor at Monroe Community College.

In fact, Smith even sent a letter to Pavia prior to the 1991 dinner, apologizing for their run-in and congratulating him on the banquet's success.

Pavia's health problems forced him to the sidelines after the 1990-91 season. In his lengthy illness he's had a kidney, part of a lung, and thyroid removed. He's also endured numerous series of radiation treatments — including a set in the last month.

Yet he still considers himself more fortunate than the Camp Good Days campers.

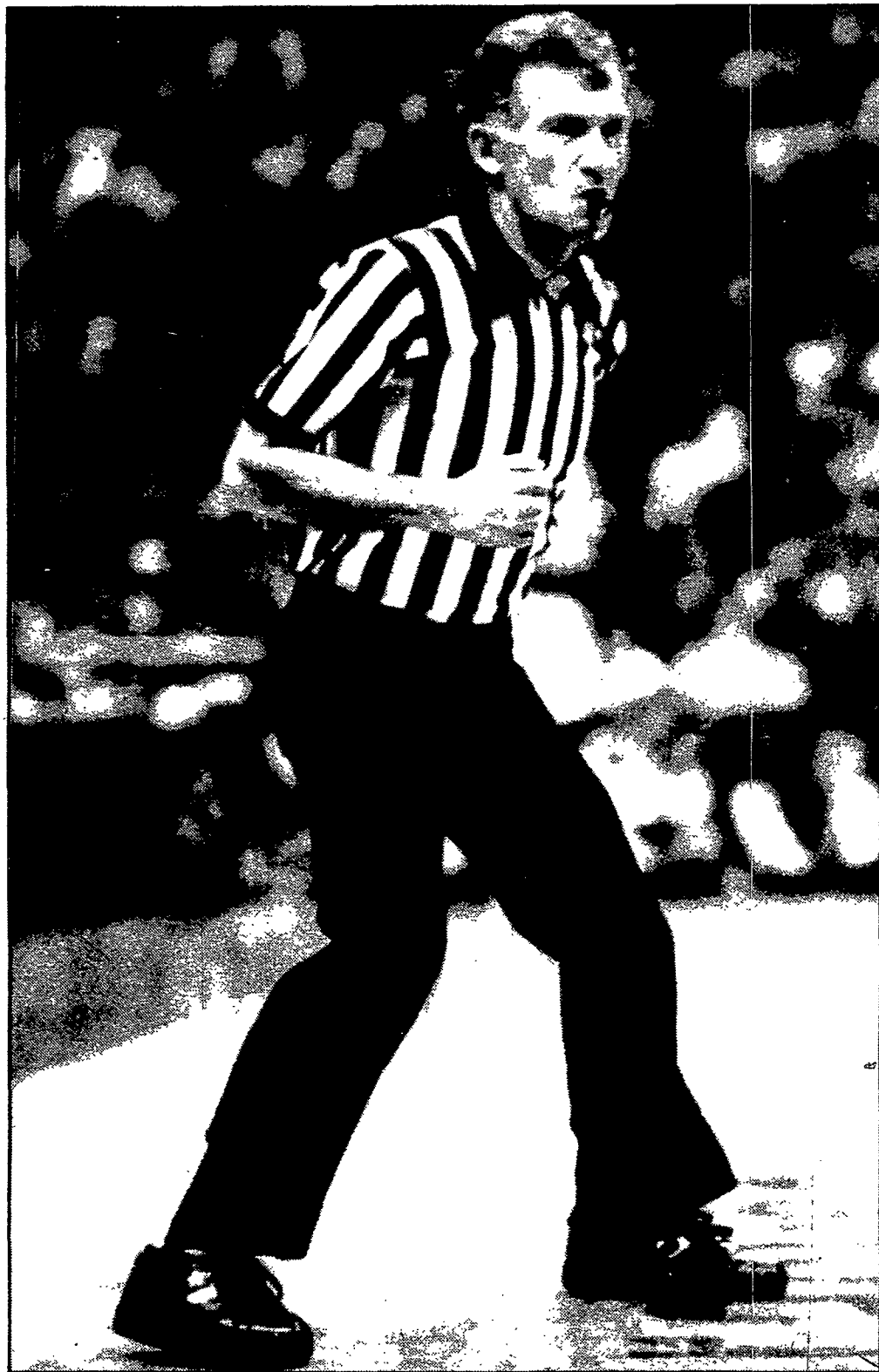
"Going through the treatments, it's pretty rough," Pavia admitted. But, he added, "I had 40 good years (before getting cancer), and these kids get it early. People don't know how cancer disrupts families."

Pavia looks to the future with high hopes, noting that he plans on continuing the annual dinner regardless of his health condition.

How does somebody keep a battle like this going for as long as Pavia has? Slomkowski, a Fairport resident and St. John's of Rochester parishioner, calls it a triumph of the spirit.

"He has been very upbeat and positive. He tells many people the same thing — that you can't give in (to cancer)," Slomkowski remarked.

"He also has faith in God. And faith is something you can't defeat."



Pete Pavia has earned a reputation as one of the finest college basketball officials in the United States.

Courtesy of Pete Pavia